

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

**Adults and Children
in the Roman
Empire**

Thomas Wiedemann



Adults and Children in the Roman Empire

There is little evidence to enable us to reconstruct what it felt like to be a child in the Roman world. We do, however, have ample evidence about the feelings and expectations that adults had for children over the centuries between the end of the Roman republic and late antiquity.

Thomas Wiedemann draws on this evidence to describe a range of attitudes towards children in the classical period, identifying three areas where greater individuality was assigned to children: through political office-holding; through education; and, for Christians, through membership of the Church in baptism. These developments in both pagan and Christian practices reflect wider social changes in the Roman world during the first four centuries of the Christian era.

Of obvious value to classicists, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire*, first published in 1989, is also indispensable for anthropologists, as well as those interested in ecclesiastical and social history.

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Thomas Wiedemann



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THOMAS WIEDEMANN



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- 22 Tombstone of Avita. BM Sculpt. 649. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ANRW* H. Temporini & W. Haase (eds.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, many vols. (Berlin/New York, 1972 on).
- Bücheler, *CLE* F. Bücheler, *Carmina Latina Epigraphica* (Leipzig, 1921).
- CIL* *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, many vols. (Berlin, 1869 on).
- CJ* The *Codex Justinianus*, ed. P. Krueger (1877: reprint Dublin/Zürich, 1967).
- CSEL* The *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, many vols. (Vienna, 1866 on).
- Daremberg-Saglio C. Daremberg & E. Saglio (eds.), *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines*, 5 vols. (Paris, 1877 on).
- Digest* Justinian's *Digest* of Roman law; the standard text is that of Th. Mommsen & P. Krueger, available with an English translation by A. Watson; 4 vols. (Philadelphia, 1985).
- IG* *Inscriptiones Graecae*, many vols. (Berlin, 1873 on).
- ILCV* E. Diehl (ed.), *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres*, 3 vols. (reprint Berlin, 1961).
- ILS* H. Dessau (ed.), *Inscriptiones Latinae selectae*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1892–1914).

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- JRS* The *Journal of Roman Studies* (1910 on).
- Mansi J. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, 52 vols. (reprints Paris, 1901, and Graz, 1960).
- MGHAA* *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi*, many vols. (Berlin, 1878 on).
- Pauly-Wissowa* G. Wissowa (ed.), *Pauly's Real-encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, many vols. (Stuttgart, 1894 on).
- PG* J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, many vols. (Paris, 1886 on).
- PL* J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, many vols. (Paris, 1878 on).
- Pliny, *NH* Pliny the Elder's encyclopaedia, the *Naturalis Historia*; text with English translation in 10 volumes by H. Rackham, H. H. S. Jones & D. E. Eichholz (Loeb, 1944–63).
- RIB* L. R. Collingwood & R. P. Wright (eds.), *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, vol. I (Oxford, 1965).
- TAPhA* *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, (1869 on).

INTRODUCTION

It almost seems as if the relationship between parents and children in antiquity had a tenderness often missing in modern times, when families drift apart and their members lose touch with one another.¹

The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awake.²

These contradictory estimates of the ancients' attitudes to their children illustrate the very different approaches and concerns which modern scholars have brought to the subject. The roots of their interest have been various, as will be the reasons for the interest of the readers of this book. One of the earliest approaches came from educational psychologists developing the theories of Piaget and others; another from social anthropology, following on descriptions of childhood in non-western societies such as Margaret Mead's *Growing up in Samoa*. The Frankfurt School's belief that historical events needed to be explained in terms of the traumatic childhoods suffered by historical figures such as Martin Luther or Adolf Hitler led from 'psychobiography' to the 'psychohistory' of which Lloyd de Mause's *History of Childhood* is an example.

Another line of approach has come from the development of interest in social and economic history during this century. The so-called Annales School in France has been particularly influential here. This approach stresses that particular historical events, especially political choices, can only be understood within the context of climate and physical geography, factors which are relatively permanent, while human institutions such as states and religious systems come and go. Philippe Ariès suggested that a

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similar uniform picture could be drawn of the way in which small children were treated in many pre-industrial societies.³ He argued that pre-bourgeois societies, both Muslim and Christian, did not share our own clear distinction between adult and child. His interpretation requires considerable qualification even for Christian late antiquity, and can hardly be applied at all to classical antiquity. For the city-states of the ancient Mediterranean, including republican Rome, the distinction between the free adult, who was at the centre of civic activity, and his children (together with his wife and his slaves) was basic to the proper ordering of civilisation.

Approaches such as these are stimulating, but they have their weaknesses. There is a tendency to look for evidence that might support a particular theory, and to ignore evidence that does not. What is exceptional may be interpreted as though it were the norm. This is an inevitable risk with a subject like the ancients' attitude to childhood, since there are no systematic accounts from antiquity itself; the modern scholar has to rely on odd references or anecdotes which he extracts from literature, or he has to interpret inscriptions or reliefs. Historical understanding requires generalisations: and it is inevitable that that process results in theories or 'models' which emphasise only a part of the wide range of cultural attitudes to be found in any society. Thus Alan Macfarlane's distinction between the attitudes towards children of 'peasant' societies as opposed to 'market' societies such as England is extremely valuable; but we cannot apply it to those exceptionally rich Romans whose attitudes were in many respects like those of propertied Englishmen. On the other hand Paul Veyne has argued that the alleged sexual licence of a minority of this same group of aristocratic Romans was 'normal' in the classical period.⁴ Scholars have not always found it easy to avoid the temptation to draw wide-ranging conclusions that ignore distinctions of chronological period, geographical area, social class, and perhaps especially gender.

The evidence that we have is insufficient to allow us to reconstruct the Roman child's view of the world. (The same is unfortunately true of Roman slaves, and even of Roman women.) It does allow a fairly full picture of some aspects of children's life in antiquity, most obviously education and schooling, on which many excellent monographs have been written. But it also allows a

INTRODUCTION

general picture of the place which adults assigned to children in their – adult – picture of the social world. This book attempts to trace changes in those adult attitudes to childhood. It is not intended to be a comprehensive collection of the evidence, literary, legal, epigraphical, or archaeological, about children in the Roman empire.⁵ Most of my examples are drawn from Latin sources, from the western part of the empire; I suspect that a very similar book could be written about the Greek world, where there is in fact a great deal more evidence.

The theme is one of change: changing attitudes towards the place of children during the first four centuries AD. These changes were connected with, if not entirely the result of, wider changes in Mediterranean society which were themselves caused by the *Pax Romana*, the unification of the Mediterranean lands within the Roman empire. No attempt is made here to narrate the political background, or to explain the social changes that led from the autonomous city-states of the classical period to the world-state of the Christian emperors of the fourth century.⁶

I began to collect the material which has gone into this book fifteen years ago; the unfulfilled intention was to submit it as an Oxford thesis. What strengths my interpretation of that evidence may have are due not only to my supervisors then, Dr Oswyn Murray and the Revd Dr Henry Chadwick, but also to Mr B. H. Warmington and the many other colleagues in Bristol and elsewhere with whom I have had the pleasure of discussing issues of Roman history. The judges of the 1987 Croom Helm Ancient History Prize made many helpful suggestions for improvements to the first draft. As always, my thanks are due to my wife Margaret for her advice on how to make my English prose more comprehensible than it would otherwise have been.

Bristol, May 1988

NOTES

- 1 G. M. Lee, 'Coptic Christianity in a changing world', *Studies in Church History 18: Religion and National Identity* (Oxford, 1982), 43.
- 2 L. de Mause, *The History of Childhood* (Chicago, 1974), 1.
- 3 P. Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (Eng.trans., London/New York, 1962).
- 4 A. Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction 1300-1840* (Oxford, 1986), section II: 'The value of children'. P. Veyne's

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views – intended to be controversial – were first published in ‘La Famille et l’amour sous le haut-empire romaine’, *Annales* 33.1 (1978), 35 ff.

- 5 E.g. J. P. Neraudau, *Etre enfant à Rome* (Paris, 1984).
- 6 Introductions to the history of this period include M. Grant, *A History of Rome* (London, 1982); C. Wells, *The Roman Empire* (Fontana, 1984). For the social changes affecting the Mediterranean city during this period, cf. A. H. M. Jones, *The Greek City* (Oxford, 1940; paperback reprint, 1981). On the religious background to this period, see R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (London, 1986).

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