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CHAPTER I

Introduction

This book deals with childhood in the vast expanse of the Roman Empire from circa 200 BCE to 400 CE. The critical reader may remark that this is a rather ambitious undertaking. For one thing, the period under study is quite long. No serious historian would endeavour to describe childhood from the 1400s to the end of the twentieth century, boldly drawing from sources as wide apart as pedagogical treatises from the sixteenth-century Spanish Netherlands and revolutionary educational handbooks from the 1960s. The geographical boundaries, too, are rather daunting: at its peak, the Roman Empire stretched from Scotland to Mesopotamia, encompassing territories in what today are thirty-five or so different nations. Furthermore, the sources consulted are very diverse, ranging from various genre literary texts to inscriptions, papyri, legal sources and archaeological and osteological evidence. The more philosophically inclined reader may also call into question the definition of the notion of childhood. Even today, childhood is after all defined differently in different cultures. When studying the life in children in bygone eras, the danger of a contemporary Western bias would appear to be ubiquitous.

As Wittgenstein famously argued, it is not always appropriate to replace a vague image with a more specific one. Too great a precision or detail in defining notions can sometimes confuse rather than clarify. This also holds for the notion of childhood: it cannot be accurately defined across cultures and eras without losing much of its significance. How, for example, can one compare a 14-year-old Brazilian boy who has been sleeping rough, begging and prostituting himself for several years, with the average schoolboy of the same age somewhere in the affluent European Union? Yet one often needs to delineate for practical reasons. When analysing epitaphs, one needs to determine up to what age the deceased should be regarded as a child. Fifteen would appear to be an appropriate cut-off point in this respect. It is, for that matter, the threshold applied by many ancient authors and contemporary international organisations

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alike.¹ Indeed, given prevailing vitamin deficiencies and nutritional habits, it seems likely that Roman girls tended to reach physical maturity around the age of 15 rather than 12. Likewise, while we think of puberty as the moment when boys shoot up at about age 15, in Antiquity this tended to occur slightly later and more gradually. Nonetheless, divisions of lifespan indicate that in the ancient perception, too, childhood ended around age 15.²

The nature of the source material dictates that most attention in this book will be devoted to boys. Girls suffered a twofold stigma as a result of which they were not often mentioned by the ancient authors: they were regarded as insignificant not only because they were young, but also because they would grow into women, who were seen to be inferior to men in every possible way. Still, I have tried to extend the focus as much as possible to girls, particularly in the chapters on child labour and sexuality.

1.1 GEOGRAPHICAL AND CHRONOLOGICAL BOUNDARIES

The chronological boundaries of this study – from circa 200 BCE to 400 CE – is primarily culturally and historically inspired and should not be interpreted as strictly as in a political institutional study. From the third century BCE onwards, there are sufficient literary sources to adequately document a study on childhood in Rome. For earlier periods, one would have had to rely on comparative anthropological materials and available data on the Indo-European culture. This lack of written sources makes it virtually impossible to study childhood in the Roman kingdom or early Republic.³

By the period for which written sources are available, the Greek-Hellenistic culture had already expanded westward considerably. The initial Hellenisation of Rome and the West occurred quite early on. The subsequent acceleration of the process during the Empire was due in part to the school system, which generated a literary-rhetorical culture that was shared by the elites across Roman territory. By 400 CE, the end of the period under consideration, Christianity had firmly taken root in the Roman Empire, and Christian philosophers had begun to adopt an entirely different perspective on childhood.

¹ See for example Convention no. 138 of the International Labour Organization.

² Laurence (2005) on later growth of boys and girls.

³ Cornell (1995) does study political, military, social and cultural aspects of the early Roman Empire.

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However, a study of childhood in the early Christian era – an often neglected area of historical research that has only come into focus in recent years⁴ – would easily fill a separate publication. In the present book, I mention texts by Christian authors in so far as they shed light on the juncture which they shared with their pagan contemporaries. I also consider the early Christian perspective on the topic of childhood and sexuality, as this is generally regarded to have constituted a radical break with paganism. In the conclusion, I explore how much of a revolution the rise of Christianity represented in relation to the perception of children and childhood.

The use of literary sources spanning a period of 600 years may seem rather ambitious. However, the problems encountered in this respect are not insurmountable, especially given the specificity of the topic discussed.

The ancient discourse on the human life phases are, for example, an important source of information about Greek and Roman views on childhood. Certainly in these types of text we observe very little change in terms of the concepts and classifications applied. Indeed, the division of the life course put forward by the Athenian statesman Solon in the sixth century BCE is remarkably similar to that encountered in Isidore of Seville's encyclopaedia from the seventh century CE. An equally striking continuity is observed in the ancient medical discourse: Galen, a physician of the second century CE, incorporated elements from Hippocratic writings dating back to the fifth century BCE. Moreover, the writings of Galen and Hippocrates, alongside those of many other physicians from various periods in history, were collected in the fourth-century *Liber incertus* by Greek physician Oribasius.

It is well documented that the Hellenistic-Roman educational ideal, with its great emphasis on literary-rhetorical training, prevailed up into late Antiquity. In Chapter 4, on schooling and education, I cite Seneca (philosopher at the imperial court in the first century) alongside Ausonius (the fourth-century rhetorician who worked briefly at the court of Valentinian I at Treves, but was primarily active in his birthplace Bordeaux) and Libanius (a teacher of rhetoric from the same period who worked mainly in Antioch). While the socio-cultural milieus of Seneca and either Libanius or Ausonius were not identical, they themselves were similar

⁴ For studies of family life and childhood in late Antiquity and early Christianity, a new flourishing branch of classical scholarship, I refer to G. Clark (1994), Evans Grubbs (1995), Strange (1996), Leyerle (1997), Nathan (2000), Balch and Osiek (2003), Osiek and MacDonald (2005), Bakke (2005), Cooper (2007), Vuolanto (2008), Horn and Martens (2009), Horn and Phenix (2009a) and Papaconstantinou and Talbot (2009). See also Arjava (1998) and Vuolanto (2003). Of course, these eminent studies have their predecessors, the following of which have been particularly important: Janssens (1981); Shaw (1987a and 1987b); Boswell (1988); Brown (1988).

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kinds of educators, fulfilling the same kind of tasks on the basis of a similar educational approach that was rooted in history, whereby the teacher performed an almost parental role.

In so far as the topic of child labour is concerned, the leaps in time are, in any case, less problematic (except in the case of political mandates, where one needs to pay close attention to the diachronic evolution of the institutions in question). Especially in the countryside, with its characteristic rhythm of life, one may assume there to have been a strong continuity over longer periods of time. The difference between village life in the first and the twelfth centuries is probably less than that between life in that same village in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

There are however gradual but important diachronic shifts to be observed in relation to the discourse on sexuality and paedophilia. These shifts are very revealing in so far as ancient thought on childhood is concerned and presumed shifts in attitudes with the rise of Christianity.

Geographically speaking, the scope of our study extends across the Roman Empire, from high up in Britannia to the desert of Mesopotamia. Indeed, we often tend to treat the Mediterranean region as a homogenous unit when it had in fact a great variety of social and cultural structures. Throughout the Empire, children and their families lived in very different sorts of houses and geographical contexts, and consumed very different food.⁵ Yet similar arguments can be put forward to justify the rather homogeneous approach of the present book. Either the aspects covered in this study are part of a remarkably continuous literary tradition among the cultivated elites across the Empire, or they belong to the specific circumstances or realities within a single region. An example of the latter is the prevalence of child labour in mining communities: obviously this issue is only relevant to regions where there was mining activity. As material and literary sources are scarce in many regions, one must inevitably extrapolate. In some instances, including in relation to education in Antiquity, this approach is entirely justifiable. There is after all a broad consensus within the scholarly community that papyri from Greco-Roman Egypt provide reliable information about education and training across the Roman Empire. Although politically, institutionally and socio-economically speaking Egypt was an atypical province, it is our main source of information on educational practice in Antiquity.⁶

⁵ See the recent studies by Revell (2009) and (2010) on this approach to ancient childhood which still has to be further developed.

⁶ See Bagnall (2003a and 2003b) on the importance of Egypt to the history of the Roman Empire. On education in Egypt, see especially Morgan (1998), Criboire (1996) and (2001).

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Still, a remark is needed here on the seemingly casual reliance on Greek alongside Latin sources. Greece had its own cultural identity and was Romanised to a far lesser extent than the western provinces. Education in the East remained unilingually Greek; Latin was merely the administrative language in legislation. The cities retained their Hellenistic institutions and edifices, such as the gymnasia. Language, religion and family tradition continued to be essential elements in the Greek cultural patterns that were handed down from generation to generation. Yet there was a degree of convergence: Greek citizens would proudly use their Roman names and pursue careers in the administrative apparatus of the Empire. The architecture of Greek cities was also influenced by Rome. A study by Greg Woolf on the issue of the cultural identity of the Roman East is aptly entitled 'Becoming Roman, staying Greek'.⁷

Hence, some circumspection is called for when using Greek as well as Roman sources in various fields of study. When studying epitaphs for children, for example, one must be wary of the fact that Greek and Roman epigraphic texts differed through complex customs and fashions.⁸ Even within a given region, differences between Greek and Latin epigraphic habits could be quite considerable. In the city of Rome, Latin epitaphs tended to commemorate people who had died young, while the Greek inscriptions from Rome related mostly to individuals who had lived to old age.⁹ Similarly in any discussion on religious and cultural rites of passage, a careful distinction must be made between Greek and Roman materials. And this also holds for the study of political and other institutions. The epheby, for example, was a typically Greek institution, while the Latin cities of the West tended to have youth organisations such as the *collegia iuvenum*. When talking about child magistrates and youthful political mandates, one must take due account of the fact that a *municipium* in the West of the Empire was organised differently and indeed exuded an entirely different atmosphere from the cities in the Greek East. And when reading about the tyrannical Roman *pater familias*, one must always distinguish between Roman and Greek authors, as the latter might easily have interpreted this typically Roman institution incorrectly.¹⁰

⁷ See Woolf (1994), Whitmarsh (2001) and Ostenfeld, Blomqvist and Nevett (2002).

⁸ The classic study of epigraphic habit is MacMullen (1982).

⁹ On the difference between East and West in so far as the commemoration of relatives is concerned, see Martin (1996) versus Saller and Shaw (1984). On the difference between Greek and Latin inscriptions in Rome, see Rawson (2003c: 283).

¹⁰ On epheby and *collegia iuvenum*, see Laes and Strubbe (2008: 101–121). On the image of the *pater familias*, see Saller (1999: 191), who succeeds in demonstrating that the image of the tyrannical *pater familias* is indeed down to erroneous interpretations on the part of Greek authors.

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In other cases, it is not necessary to make a strict distinction between Greek and Latin sources. The writings of the first-century Greek author Plutarch are a good example in this respect. As a member of the upper class in the cosmopolitan Mediterranean world, he was very familiar with Roman traditions and institutions, although his knowledge was probably restricted mostly to formalist and legalistic aspects. A study of children in the work of Plutarch, combined with information from other Greek and Latin sources, can thus provide worthwhile information about attitudes towards childhood in the Roman Empire as a whole.¹¹

1.2 LITERARY SOURCES¹²

What do the ancient authors tell us about children and childhood in Antiquity? In fact there are just a few classical works dealing explicitly with this topic. The *Institutio oratoria* by Quintilian, a prominent Roman teacher of rhetoric from the first century CE, describes in twelve books how boys should be trained as rhetoricians. For Quintilian, one cannot start early enough: in his view, rhetoric encompasses more than a technical mastery of language and strategies for controlling an audience. The entire first book is therefore devoted to the early childhood years: the moral and linguistic training, he argues, begins with the wet-nurses, the pedagogues and other staff surrounding the child. Plutarch (circa 46–120 CE) lived and worked in Greece, but he maintained close contacts with Rome. His sizeable oeuvre contains numerous references to education-related topics. The treatise *De liberis educandis* ('On the education of children'), sometimes incorrectly attributed to Plutarch, also provides interesting information. Finally, there is the first book of Augustine's autobiographical *Confessiones*, which is devoted to early childhood. This work, however, focuses on a tormented soul's quest for truth and happiness (which it eventually finds in the Christian faith) rather than on the specificities of childhood as such. Numerous other references to childhood and children can be found scattered across a wide range of ancient literary sources. Hence, studying ancient attitudes towards childhood is an ambitious

¹¹ For examples of such studies, see Eyben (1996) and Bradley (1999). See the remark by Rawson (2003a: 2): 'Defining a culture more widely as Greek, Roman, Hellenized or Romanized has pre-occupied many writers. I have come to the conclusion that rigid definitions of these terms are not helpful or even possible, as many of us know from attempts to define the identity of our own national culture.'

¹² There is an extensive literature on the use of literary sources in ancient historiography. See especially Hallett (1992), Corbier (1999: 1258–1261), Potter (1999), Pelling (2000), Dixon (2003: 114–116) and Eyben, Laes and Van Houdt (2003a: 9–12).

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undertaking: it requires a consistent approach to information gathering from disparate literary sources.

Estimates have it that only 2.5 per cent of the Greco-Roman literary production has been preserved, either fragmentarily or in complete texts.¹³ This astonishingly low figure compels historians to piece together all available material in an effort to arrive at as accurate a picture as possible. The literary harvest is quite diverse. The present book relies on epics, lyric and love poetry, tragedy and comedy, satires, epigrams and novels, fables and anecdotes, orations, letters, historiography and biographies, legal documents, medical texts and (popular) philosophical and/or theological treatises. Anyone who wishes to embark on historical research on the basis of such diverse source material must inevitably follow certain rules of thumb.

The undertaking of the present book would appear to be rather precarious, particularly as I intend to answer questions with which the ancient authors themselves were never preoccupied. So while it is entirely feasible to conduct a study into, say, the socio-cultural position of women in Roman society on the basis of the letters of Pliny the Younger, it is equally true that such an approach transforms the letters into a source, much like the nymph Arethusa was transformed into a source of another kind by the desire of the river god Alpheus. Such transformations are of course necessary if one intends to explore the history of mentality (after all, historiography does not stand outside time; it is rather influenced by the issues that are topical in the historian's own era). However, one should also be aware of the metamorphosis that is taking place.¹⁴

Furthermore, one needs to take into account the specificity and purpose of the various genres. The main purpose of philosophical and medical treatises is to contribute knowledge and to delineate boundaries. Legal documents are similarly concerned with delineating boundaries, and with defining rights and prohibitions. In moralistic literature, one may encounter children in exemplary roles (for example, as symbols of innocence or impotence, as an object of (excessive) mourning). Martial, in his biting satire of a brutal schoolmaster, uses as a literary device the sharp language that is characteristic of the epigram genre. It would however be rather brash to assert that what he is expressing actually corresponds to the average Roman's perception of teachers. In epic and dramatic poetry, the introduction of a child character into a drama is often intended to

¹³ Potter (1999: 60). ¹⁴ See on this topic Bettini (2002).

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enhance the emotional impact of the piece, or to elicit compassion on the part of the audience.¹⁵ By revealing that newly wed Roman brides were required to straddle the enormous phallus of a statue representing Priapus, the historian is sure to capture the attention of a sensation-loving audience. However, honesty demands that he point out that this supposed custom is mentioned only by Augustine, in a polemic passage where the Church Father denounces paganism. In other words, a degree of exaggeration on the part of the source cannot be excluded here.¹⁶

However, paying due attention to genre requirements will not resolve all issues. It is, for example, impossible to fully understand the feelings and emotions of an ancient author. The principles of rhetoric stamp their mark on almost every ancient literary product. Romans generally expressed their sentiments in a conventional, rhetorically stylised language. Years of training and conditioning apparently had a lasting impact in this respect. Any direct contact with ancient authors is out of the question, as their personality is shrouded in a veil of formalism. Contemporary moral concepts such as sincerity, spontaneity and emotionality were entirely alien to ancient writers.¹⁷ Hence, it is rather irrelevant that ancient consolatory texts for a deceased child may sound cool and detached to the modern ear. One may reasonably assume that Roman parents were not immune to grief. However, that in itself is not a very spectacular conclusion for the historian of mentality. What interests him or her more is how individuals gave expression to this grief within the conventions and mental frameworks that prevailed in their own era. Any statement regarding the intensity of feelings expressed in ancient texts is therefore doomed to either project our own mentality on people from the past, or to lead to a kind of cheap sentimentality that, even if it contains an element of truth, will inevitably be found lacking in historical value.¹⁸

When dealing with literary sources, historians must also take into account the so-called *persona* theory, which warns that one should not automatically identify the narrator with the author. Even if Ausonius dedicates a poem to his favourite, a Germanic slave girl called Bissula whom he raised as his own daughter, it is impossible to tell for certain whether Ausonius ever possessed such a child. It is, after all, not inconceivable that

¹⁵ Martial, *Ep.* 9, 68. See Kleijwegt (2004: cols. 868–870) for a recent approach to children in Greek epic and tragic literature. See also Sifakis (1979) and MacCary (1982).

¹⁶ Augustine, *Civ. Dei* 6, 9, 3 and 7, 24, 2

¹⁷ For pertinent remarks on the study of attitudes and feelings in Antiquity, see Harris (2001: 20–23) and Laes (2003b: 26–27).

¹⁸ For a detailed example in relation to Fronto's *De nepote amisso*, see Eyben and Laes (2005).

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the poem was intended merely as a literary game; an ironic reference by Ausonius to his predecessors who commonly wrote about such children. It is also conceivable that the author adopted a posture, a value pattern that was not necessarily his own, nor indeed that of his readers, but which was nevertheless recognisable to the audience. In the famous ‘kissing poems’ by Catullus, the first-person narrator arguably presents himself as an effeminate weakling whose sexual ability does not extend beyond playful and repetitive kissing.¹⁹ The sharp mockery of the female in Juvenal’s sixth satire is not so much a reflection of contemporary reality as a reactionary view of a particular section of the public on contemporary issues.

While these remarks about the reliability of ancient sources may undoubtedly prove quite valuable, they should not lead to the kind of absolute scepticism that would paralyse the historian. Ultimately, literature did provide a referential framework for the cultivated elites in society; it was, in other words, not totally detached from the world around it. Ancient literature was not just a game in which one could say or write as one pleased. Even if Martial represented facts satirically, his views can help us form a picture of certain aspects of ancient education. There were ancient schoolmasters who taught large groups of girls and boys in dire circumstances – a situation which Martial denounced satirically. If an author refers in a moralistic passage to the appalling conditions of child workers in a goldmine, he and his audience must at least have been able to picture such a situation. This also holds for some of the more contentious topics in ancient literature. To return briefly to the example of Ausonius’ Bissula: his audience must already have been familiar with the notion of favourites who were raised in their master’s home, as this is a recurrent topic in the literary tradition. And when the first-person narrator in the *Anthologia Palatina*, a late Antique collection of epigrams, presents himself as a fervent pederast, he nevertheless remains a ‘person’, someone with whom the reader can identify and who acts in familiar circumstances.

Moreover, certain attitudes towards and concepts of childhood are expressed across the various genres, so that they become reference points for gaining insight into the ‘public opinion’.²⁰ cursory remarks by authors can be especially helpful in this respect, as the following example illustrates: in a theoretical discourse, the ancient authors warn that the sixty-third life year is a dangerous one: an *annus climactericus*. Are we merely concerned here with a theory of the ancient moralists and their

¹⁹ Catullus, *Carm.* 5 and 7. See Van Houdt (2003–2004).

²⁰ Hermans (1990: 19).

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preoccupation with numerology and numerical symbolism, or is there more to it than that? Aulus Gellius mentions that Emperor Augustus was pleased and relieved to have passed this crucially important year in his life. This may be seen as an indication that the notion of the unlucky sixty-third year was not merely a literary device, but was actually taken seriously among the Roman elites.²¹

1.3 INSCRIPTIONS, PAPYRI AND OTHER SOURCES

Even if the historian has successfully delved into the diverse territory of literary materials, he or she will need to dig even deeper, for the sources tapped thus far represent only the crust of society. These lettered elites included the senatorial class, knights, local *decuriones* who were pursuing a career in their hometown, rich merchants, soldiers and practitioners of professions requiring reading and writing skills (for example, physicians, architects), administrative personnel, lettered slaves and freedmen.

In order to obtain a more general picture, one needs to consult other sources as well. Again, the available material is often rather fragmentary. Partial inscriptions on stone, scraps of papyri in often illegible handwriting, potsherds and coins with elusive messages, as well as non-verbal sources, including archaeological finds (from art to architecture to artefacts) and osteological data; all may contribute towards the completion of this puzzle consisting of a seemingly infinite number of pieces.

As far as Roman Antiquity is concerned, inscriptions are an important source of information on children and childhood. Moreover, they should not be regarded separately, but in conjunction with the various literary sources. They are, in many ways, complementary. Too great an emphasis on either source may result in a distorted image.²²

Over 40,000 Latin inscriptions, including an estimated 29,250 epitaphs, have been preserved from the city of Rome alone.²³ Often, these inscriptions are short, rather stereotypical texts on a simple stone plate, mentioning the name and age of the deceased person (possibly with qualitative adjectives), as well as the name of (and the kinship tie with) whoever has commissioned the text. As far as the social milieus of these inscriptions are concerned, they seem to belong to the lower and middle classes of the urban population. The price list of funerary *collegia* shows that the lowest contribution amounted to 120 sestertii, the equivalent to three months'

²¹ Aulus Gellius, *NA* 15, 7, 3. See also p. 88.

²² See Bodel (2001) and Lassere (2007) for excellent introductions to Roman epigraphy.

²³ King (2000: 119).