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978-0-521-89746-4 - Children in the Roman Empire: Outsiders Within

Christian Laes

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CHILDREN IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Roman children often seem to be absent from the ancient sources. How did they spend their first years of life? Did they manage to find their way among the various educators, often slaves, who surrounded them from an early age? Was Roman education characterised by loving care or harsh discipline? What was it like to be a slave child? Were paedophilia and child labour accepted and considered 'normal'? This book focuses on all 'forgotten' Roman children: from child emperors to children in the slums of Rome, from young magistrates to little artisans, peasants and mineworkers. The author has managed to trace them in a wide range of sources: literature and inscriptions, papyri, archaeological finds and ancient iconography. In Roman society, children were considered outsiders. But at the same time they carried within them all the hopes and expectations of the older generation, who wanted them to become fully fledged Romans.

CHRISTIAN LAES is Assistant Professor of Latin and Ancient History at the Free University of Brussels and the University of Antwerp. He has published widely on the experience of life in Roman times and late Antiquity, and more specifically on the subjects of childhood and youth. To date he has published four books as well as some twenty international contributions on the subject.

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Preface

Fort Worth, Texas, November 2000. On the eve of the conference on 'Early Christian Families in Context', organised by the Texas Christian University, I came across someone with a special interest in the scholarly meeting. Although he was very much a layman in this field, he was keen to attend a number of lectures: 'The family, that's something that goes to my heart' were the rather touching words with which he expressed his appreciation for the conference theme and the entire gathering. Almost in the same breath, he affirmed his deep conviction that the emergence of Christianity had rocked the foundations of pagan society; that the new morality of the early Christian era had changed the appearance of the world. I am eternally grateful that, ultimately, the man did not attend the conference. I still wonder today how he might have reacted to my lecture on page-boys in Roman households and the sexual exploitation they commonly had to endure; or to that by a fellow researcher who placed Paul's command that slaves should obey their masters in the context of the absolute sexual subordination of female slaves to their owners; or to the panel debate in which the biblical perception of homosexuality was subjected to critical analysis.

The man's misconception somehow reminded me of an anecdote by the renowned medievalist Barbara Hanawalt in the introduction to her masterly book *Growing Up in Medieval London* (1993). When she explained to a woman that she was writing a book about childhood in medieval times, the rather endearing response was: 'Childhood? But children worked in factories during the Middle Ages. There wasn't childhood.'

The twentieth century was, without any doubt, the century of the child. Never before in the history of Western civilisation was the spotlight directed so firmly on children and their wellbeing. It would appear that the previously unheard-of possibilities of the new media have 'psychologised' contemporary society. Words such as infant, toddler, preschooler, preadolescent and adolescent, which originated in developmental

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psychology, have become as commonplace as talk of the weather and climate. Our educational system is adapted maximally to the needs of the child (and, as our perception of those needs change rather often and quickly, so too does our educational framework). Age groups are a terribly important concept in our education system. It is, for example, considered problematic if a child has to repeat a year, especially if this occurs more than once in their school career. Children live very much in their own world, as the confectionery and leisure industries are fully aware. Ideally, they should be kept well away from such unpleasantities as death, violence (including in movies), foul language and pornography. The patriarchal society, in which children were subjected to the unquestionable authority of their father or parents, is a thing of the past. Children's rights and participation are an issue in human rights discourse and increasingly in politics too. The philosophy of childhood and philosophising with children are now recognised and established areas of scholarly inquiry.

At the same time, the mass media have reduced distances between peoples and they confront us with societies and cultures where the notion of childhood is interpreted entirely differently. Poverty and malnutrition continue to kill thousands of children in the developing world on any given day. Many young girls, often still preadolescent, are married off and subsequently become pregnant prematurely and commonly die. According to UN reports, about 70,000 teenage mothers and 1,000,000 of their babies perish each year. Child labour is a daily reality for 250 million children.¹

Western attitudes towards children are often also ambiguous: we emphasise the importance of a close bond between parents and their offspring, yet many infants spend their days in daycare centres; we talk about children's rights and empowerment, yet are mortified at the thought of a minor seeking euthanasia; and quite recently in my native Belgium, the mere suggestion of lowering the age of sexual consent caused a storm of protest and indignation.

There is no one science that has a monopoly on research into childhood. Whenever children and children's issues come up for public debate, we are bombarded with the opinions of pedagogues and educational experts, psychiatrists and psychologists, criminologists and sociologists, social workers and teachers. Historians, by contrast, tend not to get involved in such discussions. During the mass hysteria in the wake of the much-publicised Dutroux affair in Belgium in 1996, there was a noticeable lack

¹ See www.ifsw.org/f38000082.html.

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of historical analysis of the notion of paedophilia. Historians of Antiquity could undoubtedly have made a valuable contribution to the debate, but most chose to remain silent. One of the few who did speak out in the public debate on paedophilia was Italian scholar Riccardo Vattuone from Bologna, but he experienced great difficulty in finding a publisher or an academic journal that would accept his article. His theses, while far from shocking, sharpened the debate by their intentionally critical and somewhat provocative angle.

The price that historians of childhood had to pay for their silence was not slight. Not only did they confirm the cliché of the academic in the ivory tower; they also perpetuated the public's ignorance and misconceptions about the past (as in the anecdotes above about people's perception of early Christianity and childhood in the medieval period, or the 'mid-evil period' as it is sometimes referred to).

It is neither my wish nor my intention to explore the underlying reasons for the reticence exhibited by some historians. The fierce nature of academic competition and related factors no doubt come into play. The publish-or-perish mentality entails that researchers prefer to publish in high-ranked international journals. Readability and accessibility are usually not a primary concern. Accounts for a broader audience, which are deemed less important on an academic curriculum, often fail to materialise because of a lack of time. Moreover, some scholars can hardly hide their disdain for the genre, and refer to it scathingly as 'vulgarising literature'.

In the present book, I refuse to choose between a scholarly approach and a form which appeals to a broad audience with a wide interest. The one need not exclude the other. This book grew out of my doctoral thesis, 'Outsiders met toekomst. Kinderen in de Romeinse Oudheid (ca. 200 v. C.–ca. 400 n. C.)'² which I defended at the Catholic University of Leuven in October 2004. A reworked version of this doctorate was published in Dutch with the Flemish publishing house Davidsfonds in 2006 – a book targeted at classicists and ancient historians as well as the public at large. Amply illustrated, this 350-page book retained the elaborate use of footnotes and the extensive bibliography of the original doctorate.³ This English translation is again a reworked and fully updated version of the Dutch original: the bibliography has been updated to include works published up to 2010, and some sections of text have been adapted to reflect the most recent trends in this fast-growing field of ancient scholarship.

² 'Outsiders with a future: Children in Roman Antiquity (approx. 200 BCE–approx. AD 400)'

³ See for example the review by Verstraete (2006).

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The purpose of this publication is twofold. First and foremost, I wish to describe as vividly as possible the experience of childhood in the Roman Empire during the late Republic and the imperial era. Secondly, I intend to offer an insight into how cultivated male Romans (the class of citizens that accounts for the bulk of our source material) perceived childhood and children. These topics are framed within the life-course approach, as I shall try to sketch how children used to live, from birth to the coming of age, with a special focus on aspects such as early childhood, schooling, work and initiation into sexuality.

The manner in which I introduce the reader to these perceptions and experiences varies quite substantially from chapter to chapter. Ideally, this book would consist primarily of personal stories, encounters with real people from Antiquity. Such a rich palette would undoubtedly bring the past to life. Unfortunately, we lack the sources to write such accounts. It is the lot of the historian of Antiquity that there are no legal records with which to bring to life an entire Roman village (as E. Le Roy Ladurie (1975) was famously able to do in the case of the Montaignou, on the basis of inquisition records); nor ancient city archives like those Hanawalt was able to rely on when writing *Growing Up in Medieval London* (1993).

Consequently, the reader will have to settle for a combination of perspectives, styles and narrative techniques. A study of children from the past is unthinkable without a careful methodological review of the possibilities and limitations presented by the subject matter. Historical and philosophical reflection on the notion of childhood, the sources consulted, the era and locality under study, the scholarly research tradition and bibliography is indispensable, as the pitfalls for author and readers alike are plenty. In the introduction, I shall discuss these issues in further detail. Chapter 2 sketches the demographic and material context primarily from the perspective of a child in ancient Rome. On the basis of the facts and figures from archaeological and literary sources, the reader is able to form an impression of the backdrop to the life of children in ancient Rome. As regards data on early childhood (Chapter 3), I rely primarily on ancient physicians and philosophers. Here the narrative is rather more descriptive, though I have added anecdotal evidence where at all possible to liven up the account. Then, in the sections on education and child labour (Chapters 4 and 5), the focus is more, though not exclusively, on remarkable stories, real people and concrete facts. Here we encounter children as they wrestle with the authority of their schoolmasters and pedagogues, young aristocrats who were already expected to exhibit certain political aspirations, as well as youthful beggars and miners. In Chapter 6, I

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consider a selection of case stories relating to the controversial topic of paedophilia in ancient society. Here, the reader is introduced to a number of sometimes very diverse theoretical perspectives on the phenomenon.

A historian can never just tell a story. Footnotes are the metre whereby a strict form is imposed on his historical narrative. Hence, this book contains many footnotes. I take comfort in the thought that some readers will make the effort to look up some of the original passages cited, to either confirm my interpretations or to reject them where appropriate. Without footnotes, historical accounts can quickly degenerate into unsubstantiated stories.

The attentive reader will notice that, in addition to an amalgam of narrative techniques, I also rely on a variety of methodologies, including theories from the fields of psychology, sociology, comparative anthropology and demography. While not allowing myself to be shackled by any particular scientific discipline, I build on their findings to gain insight into the complex history of mentality in ancient Rome.

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Writing this book was a real pleasure: it was an undertaking that inspired me with the same kind of scholarly passion that I felt when I was working on my doctoral thesis. My gratitude goes first and foremost to Emiel Eyben, the inspirational professor who initiated me into the wondrous world of the history of mentality in Greek and Roman Antiquity and in the early Christian era. Many thanks go to my supervisor Toon Van Houdt and co-supervisor Dorothy Pikhaus, who taught me scholarly meticulousness, and provided assistance and support. I shall always remember fondly the lengthy discussions we had as they urged me to rethink or reformulate some of my theses. Thanks are also due to the members on my doctoral commission, Professors Johan Strubbe (Leiden), Katelijn Vandorpe (Leuven) and Jean Goossens (Leuven), for their many suggestions and corrections, as well as words of encouragement. Marc Vercruysse and Kaat Nonneman were the critical and alert readers of an early version of the Dutch book. The University of Antwerp generously provided me with a grant for part of the translation costs. I am also particularly grateful to Stephen Windross for his invaluable and never ceasing help with the English translation. Internationally, my correspondence and personal meetings with Beryl Rawson always provided an incentive to continue my work on 'our' theme. In sadness I acknowledge that Beryl did not live to see this book in printed form. Many contacts with other scholars in the field, some of whom became friends, have been similarly inspiring and thought-provoking.

There is certainly more in life than scholarship and research. I am eternally grateful to my parents for providing the necessary *otium* or peace which enabled me to pursue my research interests, in addition to my work as a teacher and later on as a university professor and my leisure activities. My brother and sister-in-law, little nephew

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and niece, friends and family, students and colleagues brought colour to my days and acted as a sounding board for my ideas. I am more deeply indebted to them than I could ever wish to express in just a few words.

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Abbreviations of the ancient sources used are according to the standard works listed below, in which one can find all bibliographical data of the editions used.

Greek inscriptions according to *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum. Consolidated index for volumes xxxvi–xlv (1986–1995)* (ed. J. H. M. Strubbe; Amsterdam, 1999): 677–688 and the following volumes of the *SEG*. See also <http://epigraphy.packhum.org/inscriptions/main>

Latin inscriptions according to *L'Année épigraphique (2003)* (Paris, 2006): 745–750 and the *Epigraphische Datenbank Frankfurt (EDCS)*, available online at: www.manfredclaus.de

Papyrus editions according to the *Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets*, ed. J. F. Oates *et al.* (Oakville, CT, 2001); also consultable online at: <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/clist.html>

<i>AE</i>	<i>L'Année épigraphique</i>
<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i> , ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase. Berlin and New York, 1972–
<i>AP</i>	<i>Anthologia Palatina</i>
<i>BE</i>	<i>Bulletin épigraphique</i>
<i>CGL</i>	<i>Corpus Glossariorum Latinorum</i> , 7 vols., ed. G. Löwe and G. Götz. Leipzig, 1888–1923
<i>CIL</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i>
<i>CLE</i>	<i>Carmina Latina Epigraphica</i>
<i>CRF</i>	<i>Comicorum Romanorum praeter Plautum et Syri quae feruntur sententias fragmenta</i> , 2 vols., ed. O. Ribbeck. 3rd edn, Leipzig, 1897–1898.
<i>EA</i>	<i>Epigraphica Anatolica</i>
<i>EAOR</i>	<i>Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell'Occidente Romano</i>
<i>EE</i>	<i>Ephemeris Epigraphica</i>

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<i>FD III</i>	<i>Fouilles de Delphes III: Epigraphie</i>
<i>FGC</i>	<i>Fragmenta Comicoorum Graecorum</i> , 5 vols., ed. A. Meineke. Berlin, 1839–1857
<i>FGrH</i>	<i>Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i> , 16 vols., ed. F. Jacoby. Berlin and Leyden, 1923–1958
<i>GDI</i>	<i>Sammlung der griechischen Dialekt-inschriften</i>
<i>GV</i>	W. Peek, <i>Griechische Vers-Inschriften I. Grab-Epigrammen</i> (Berlin 1955)
<i>I. Bubon</i>	<i>Inschriften von Bubon (Nordlykien)</i>
<i>IG</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i>
<i>IGRR</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae ad res Romanas pertinentes</i>
<i>ILS</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae</i>
<i>IRT</i>	<i>Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania</i>
<i>I. Stratonikeia</i>	<i>Die Inschriften von Stratonikeia</i>
Merkelbach and Stauber	R. Merkelbach and J. Stauber, <i>Steinepigramme aus dem Griechischen Osten</i> , vols. I–IV (Leipzig and Stuttgart, 1998)
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i> , 168 vols., ed. J.-P. Migne. Paris, 1857–1868
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , 222 vols., ed. J.-P. Migne. Paris, 1844–1855
<i>REA</i>	<i>Revue des Etudes Anciennes</i>
<i>REG</i>	<i>Revue des Etudes Grecques</i>
<i>RIB</i>	<i>Roman Inscriptions from Britain</i>
<i>RIT</i>	<i>Die römischen Inschriften von Tarraco</i>
<i>RIU</i>	<i>Die römische Inschriften Ungarns</i>
<i>RLAC</i>	<i>Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum</i> , ed. T. Klausser and E. Dassmann. Leipzig and Stuttgart, 1914–
<i>SB</i>	<i>Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Ägypten</i>
<i>SEG</i>	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i>
<i>SHA</i>	<i>Scriptores Historiae Augustae</i>
<i>TAM</i>	<i>Tituli Asiae Minoris</i> , 5 vols. Vienna, 1901–1989
Vérilhac	A.-M. Vérilhac, <i>Paides aoroi: Poésie funéraire</i> , I–II. Athens, 1978–1982
Vip.	S. Lazzarini, <i>Lex metallis Dicta. Studi sulla seconda tavola di Vipasca</i> . Rome, 2001