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Ideas of Childhood in Roman Britain: The Bioarchaeological and Material Evidence

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Abstract and Keywords

Since the 1990s there has been a burgeoning focus on the experience and treatment of children in the ancient world. The majority of studies have utilized historical and iconographic sources more than the archaeological record, resulting in an image of Roman childhood that is dominated by the view from Rome. For Roman Britain, the archaeological context, especially the funerary domain, is a fruitful source of evidence concerning childhood. The bioarchaeological and material evidence from Romano-British cemeteries is reviewed here. Skeletal remains provide valuable evidence relating to the health and care of past children. The integration of the skeletal data with the material evidence from the funerary context can illuminate past perceptions of childhood and the social construction of this earlier part of the life course. Theoretical and methodological developments within archaeology are paving the way for a more complete understanding of Roman childhood.

Keywords: skeletal remains, palaeopathology, stable isotopes, funerary, grave goods, identity, life course, metabolic disease, infanticide

Introduction

> *Once overlooked, ancient children are now subjects of overviews. But—and here we are less fortunate—it is some 2,000 years too late to learn very much about them.*
>
> (Golden 2011: 262)

CHILDHOOD in the past is a burgeoning field of study and has received a great deal of attention from scholars of the ancient world, including Golden (2011: 262) quoted at the head of this chapter. As a result of a focus on childhood within the discipline of history (e.g. Ariès 1962; Stone 1977; Pollock 1983), it is now widely recognized that perceptions of childhood do not subscribe to a universal reality, but instead are contingent upon historical and cultural context. The seminal book by Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), led to a shift in the concept of the family from that of a fixed biological entity to a historically contingent construct (James et al. 1998).

Within archaeology, feminist and gender discourse, together with the influence of studies of childhood within history, have acted as a stimulus to debates concerning children in narratives of the past. Initial studies of childhood within archaeology were concerned with children's 'invisibility' in archaeological discourse. The neglect of children, it was argued, stemmed from the same anthrocentric biases that had previously served to marginalize women (Lillehammer 1989; Baker 1997):

> children have been both absent/invisible from the archaeological record, and invisible, unknowable at the conceptual level. Contemporary culturally constructed social (p. 304) knowledge, embedded as it is in masculist ideologies, fits 'children' in the interpretative framework as incomplete humans, that is, not male/masculine.
>
> (Baker 1997: 187)

Since this important initial research, studies of childhood have developed towards a consideration of the culturally specific constructions of childhood within different time periods and places (e.g. Sofaer Derevenski 1994; Moore and Scott 1997; Gowland 2001; Halcrow and Tayles 2008). A useful way of conceptualizing childhood was described within the discipline as follows:

> Childhood provides an interpretive frame for contextualising the early years of human life. Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural or universal feature of human groups but appears a specific structural and cultural component of many societies.
>
> (Prout and James 1997: 8)

Furthermore, studies of the past started to recognize that children are active agents within society, rather than passive beings imprinted by the socializing forces of adults (Prout and James 1997). The importance of children as a focus of study in their own right is now acknowledged by numerous scholars and is reflected by the development of the journal *Childhood in the Past*.

Studies have focused on childhood not as a separate or distinct entity, but a construct that must be analysed and understood within the chronology of the life course as a whole. Age is now conceptualized as a central aspect of social identity and a highly significant structuring element within society. A life-course perspective has been adopted by most

social scientists in their study of age identity. The life-course approach differs from previous approaches to age identity in that it considers the fluidity of identity throughout the life of an individual from birth to death (see A. Moore, this volume). This chapter provides an overview of these debates in relation to the archaeological evidence for ideas of childhood in Roman Britain. In particular, this chapter will focus on the bioarchaeological and funerary evidence. Before we discuss the various strands of archaeological data, it is worth first outlining what classical sources had to say about childhood in the Roman Empire in order to provide some context.

Childhood in the Roman World: Classical Perspectives

Since the 1990s there has been a considerable amount of research on childhood and the family in the Roman world, culminating in numerous books and edited volumes (e.g. Dixon 1992; Rawson and Weaver 1997; Harlow and Laurence 2002; Rawson 2003, 2011; Dasen and Späth 2010). This research is almost exclusively derived from a historical or classical perspective, drawing upon literary sources, medical texts (especially Soranus' *Gynaecology*), as well as epigraphic and monumental evidence (e.g. Laurence (p. 305) 2000; Harlow and Laurence 2002). This work has been important for understanding Roman perceptions of children. The aforementioned studies have demonstrated that childhood was recognized as a distinctive stage of the life course in the Roman world, and historical texts from this period allude to the charm of childish characteristics (Dixon 1992). Iconographic evidence likewise depicts children learning and at play—activities that we would also regard as particularly childlike. The demarcation of this developmental period into a series of distinct stages is also evident from historical documentation. The term *infantia*, which literally means 'not speaking', was ascribed to children until the age of 7 years. From then, terminology differentiated between the sexes; *puer* or *puella* were employed, and males and females experienced divergent life-course trajectories in terms of social age transitions. Virginity is, for the first time, attributed as a characteristic after the age of 7 years (Fraschetti 1997). Roman males underwent a significant rite of passage at approximately 14–16 years of age, during a ceremony that took place in both public and private; they replaced their *toga praetexta* with the *toga virilis* and removed their *bulla* (Eyben 1993: 6; Fraschetti 1997: 64). This event signified a new social age for males, who were then considered 'more responsible' individuals as *adolescens*, until approximately 25–30 years of age (Weidemann 1989: 116).

Females have no similar rite of passage; the onset of menarche does not appear to have been socially significant, and only upon marriage did they experience a change in status (Fraschetti 1997: 63). Epigraphic and documentary evidence indicates that high-status females in Rome may have married as early as 12 years of age—puberty apparently not being a prerequisite for marriage (Hopkins 1965). However, in a re-examination of the epigraphic evidence from Rome and the wider empire, Shaw (1987) convincingly demonstrated that, for the majority of Roman women, marriage tended to occur from the late teens to early twenties and for males in the mid-twenties. Shaw (1987: 33) argues that those very few historical sources that discuss the age of marriage for women tend to refer only to the 'narrowest of elites' and are thus largely irrelevant for most of the population.

The great majority of historical sources pertaining to Roman childhood are biased towards Rome and Italy. As a society's life course is culturally constructed, it is subject to temporal and spatial differences, which have been observed in studies of funerary data

from the Roman Empire (e.g. Gowland 2001; Revell 2005). Therefore, the relevance of historical sources from Rome for Roman Britain may be regarded as questionable. In the absence of such a rich corpus of historical data from Britain, we must turn to the archaeological evidence. As highlighted above, one particularly fruitful source of information is the funerary context. This context is unique, because it provides a crucial link between individuals and material culture (Gowland and Knüsel 2006) and thus one can infer aspects of age-related social identity through patterns of deposition and ritual treatment. When interpreting funerary evidence, one must be cautious not to be overly simplistic; we are after all dealing with the treatment of the dead, not the living, and glimpsing past identities through the distorting lens of ritual practice. Nevertheless, the funerary context provides a key reservoir of data for understanding perceptions of (p. 306) childhood in Roman Britain. It is not only the mode of burial that is of significance, but also the skeletal remains. The bioarchaeological evidence has been an under-exploited resource for examining perceptions of childhood in Roman Britain, though research over the last ten years has been highlighting its pivotal importance.

The Bioarchaeology of Roman Childhood

The bioarchaeological analysis of children provides crucial direct evidence for their well-being in relation to their social and physical milieu. The potential for this biological evidence to yield significant social information about the Roman family is immense and yet it is under-utilized. This is a consequence of sub- and interdisciplinary boundaries and a lack of communication across these—a situation that is thankfully now changing (see Redfern and Gowland 2012 for a discussion). The conceptualization of childhood as a *social* construction may also have contributed to the marginalization of their *physical* remains. Within such a schema, the body as a physical entity tends to be perceived as irrelevant (Shilling 1993). However, while societies may construct their own perceptions of the life course, one cannot overlook the corporeal aspects of childhood: the physical and emotional changes that accompany growth and the attainment of bodily maturation. An infant, for example, is helplessly dependent on adults for care and has basic needs that must be met if he or she is to survive. As Franks (1991) writes, our bodies are ‘an obdurate fact’ and as such should be included in narratives of childhood in the past. James and colleagues (1998: 51) also discuss the fact that ‘childhood is united by the universal biology of human physical development and cognitive potential but, in the same moment, radically differentiated by the varied social contexts in which this growth can be culturally enacted in the life course’. The interaction between the physical and the social worlds in the forging of identities will be discussed later in the chapter. below.

Age and Sex

One of the key limitations of the skeletal analysis of non-adults is the inability of osteological techniques to provide a reliable determination of biological sex. While numerous studies of non-adult remains have attempted to provide methodological sexing criteria, unfortunately these have not performed sufficiently well during independent tests. In the future it is possible that ancient DNA analysis will become more affordable and accessible, in which case this problem may be circumvented. At present, however, osteoarchaeologists rarely attempt to estimate the sex of non-adults (<18 years). This shortcoming provides some potential limitations with respect to the interpretation of age and gender during this growth period.

(p. 307) In osteological analysis it is standard practice to translate the skeletal age of the individual into a chronological age as a ‘universal’ (western) form of analysis. However, the relationship between skeletal age and chronological age is problematic. Growth and development are highly dependent on nutrition, environment, and genetics and may thus vary considerably between populations. Social environment may also have profound consequences for growth and maturation. For example, within modern contexts we observe the effect of socio-economic environment on the age of menarche in females, with higher social status often linked to a lower age of onset of menstruation (Gowland 2006). A longitudinal study of modern British populations found that height at age 7 years was a predictor of employment prospects in later life, because growth up to this time was such a sensitive indicator of socio-economic environment and psycho-social stressors (Blane 2006). This is relevant to studies of the Roman world, because adult stature is used as an important indicator of well-being in studies of the Roman Empire (e.g. Kron 2005). Another example from the ancient world is highlighted by Laurence (2000: 446), who discusses Galen’s view that puberty for Roman males began at 14 years and ended at 25 years (somewhat later than the current western norm). If real, this potentially has implications for the age estimation of Romano-British skeletal remains: delayed epiphyseal union (fusion of the bones after the cessation of growth) in past populations may result in under-ageing when using standards derived from modern populations. With regard to age-at-death, it is not accurate to consider skeletal age in purely biological terms (Gowland 2006). During life, skeletons are comprised of living tissue that responds to the social as well as physical environment in a dynamic way. This potential variation in skeletal form should not necessarily be considered in purely negative terms—as a variable to be controlled for—and instead has the potential to be harnessed so that we might better understand the subtle ways in which the hard tissues embody the Roman world.

Health and Care

Our ability to investigate the health and care of past children can be undertaken directly on the skeletal remains of non-adults or can be inferred from remnants of childhood health stress retained in the adult skeleton (see Gowland and Redfern 2010). An example of the latter is the presence of enamel defects in teeth. These relate to childhood periods of 'health stress' when the teeth are forming; because teeth do not remodel once formed, this period of poor health is effectively 'fossilized' into adulthood. The study of non-adult skeletal remains has the ability to shed light not only on the care and health of children, but also on broader social processes relating to adulthood and the family. For example, Gowland and Redfern's comparison (2010) of childhood stress indicators from Roman London and Italy has shown how they may yield information concerning living environment and population mobility. The growth period is a time during which the skeleton is particularly susceptible to environmental onslaughts, and thus, as Lewis (2007) has highlighted, children are sensitive 'barometers' of overall population (p. 308) health. Research themes in relation to childhood in the Roman world include: demography and infanticide, mobility, childcare and health, weaning and diet. It is not feasible to review all of these here, and readers are referred to Redfern and Gowland (2012) for a more thorough discussion. Here, though, I will outline a few bioarchaeological studies that highlight the ways in which non-adult skeletal remains and their treatment in death may contribute to an understanding of childhood in Roman Britain.

A number of studies since 2000 have focused on the health and mortality of non-adult remains from Roman Britain and these have served to provide a growing body of evidence concerning perceptions of children and childcare in the Roman world. A particular amount of attention has been focused on the health of children from the large Romano-British cemetery at Poundbury, Dorset (e.g. Molleson 1989, 1993; Redfern 2007; Lewis 2010; Redfern et al. 2012). Poundbury is a unique cemetery in Roman Britain in terms of its size and the large proportion of immature skeletal remains excavated from the site, which include 364 'non-adult' individuals (<17 years of age), 75 of whom were perinatal (dying around the time of birth) infants (Molleson 1989).

A distinctive feature of the infants at this site (aside from their being so many) was that the bones of many show evidence of poor health related to dietary deficiency diseases. Molleson (1989) has argued that the age of onset for this ill health was 3 months of age, after which growth becomes stunted. She suggested that this was related to the early introduction of weaning food and an exposure to dietary lead, possibly through the use of pewter dishes. If these developmental problems were the consequence of the introduction of weaning food, then weaning was occurring at an age prior to the advice of contemporary medical writers from Rome (for example, Soranus), who counselled against the introduction of foods prior to the second half of the first year (Prowse et al. 2008).

This again brings into question the relevance of textual evidence from Rome for childcare practices and perceptions in Roman Britain.

In a recent re-evaluation of the Poundbury non-adult skeletal remains, Mary Lewis (2010) records that 31 per cent exhibited evidence of metabolic disease, and a number of these showed very advanced forms of these diseases, which included rickets and scurvy (vitamin D and C deficiency, respectively). Breast milk is a good source of vitamin C, and the presence of scurvy in infants suggests complete cessation of breastfeeding, unless of course the mother was also very deficient (Brickley and Ives 2008). Several bioarchaeological studies of non-adult remains from Roman Britain have focused on the duration of breastfeeding using isotope analysis of nitrogen. Breastfed infants tend to be enriched in the isotope ^{15}Nitrogen when compared to their mother, and these values then fall upon weaning (Jay 2009). Such studies are important because the age at which food is introduced into a diet and breastfeeding ceases tends to be culturally subscribed and has implications for health and mortality later in life. A study of the weaning age and diet of the Poundbury infants and others from Iron Age and Roman Dorset was undertaken by Redfern et al. (2012). They found that infant feeding practices changed from the Iron Age to the Roman period, with the possible introduction of a special weaning diet in the later period. These findings are consistent with other isotopic studies of breastfeeding and weaning by Fuller et al. (2006) and Powell et al. (2014), which indicate that (p. 309) the process of weaning was a gradual one and appears different from the isotope profile obtained from the broadly contemporary site of Isola Sacra, near Rome. This therefore indicates that, as one might expect, infant care did not subscribe to a standardized ideal espoused by contemporary medical writers.

With regard to the presence of vitamin D deficiency at Poundbury, it should be noted that approximately 90 per cent of vitamin D is synthesized in our own bodies on contact with sunlight. Therefore, child-rearing practices that involve swaddling and keeping the children indoors are likely to lead to vitamin D deficiency—particularly in Britain with relatively few sunlight hours during winter months. In children, this leads to rickets, a condition in which the bones are insufficiently mineralized. Infants with deficiency diseases at Poundbury were recorded within the high-status burials (within mausolea) as well as the lower-status graves (Lewis 2010). This reminds us that wealth does not necessarily equate to health and certain high-status child-rearing practices (for example, swaddling, keeping infants indoors) were likely to have been detrimental to health. With respect to vitamin D deficiency in infancy, we must also consider the health status of the mother. For example, high-status cultural practices such as confinement indoors during pregnancy are likely to lead to maternal vitamin D deficiency, which will affect the developing foetus. At other sites, ‘high-status’ burials of children have also been excavated where the bones show signs of nutritional deficiencies. For example, the skeleton of a 7–8-year-old girl excavated from the Eastern Cemetery of Roman London—buried in a lead coffin with grave goods—exhibited signs of rickets.

Another piece of advice from Soranus was the withholding of colostrum. Colostrum is the initial fluid produced by mothers, prior to the milk 'coming in' two to three days after the birth of the infant. It is produced in very small quantities and is a yellowish, thick liquid that contains important components for the newborn, including leucocytes (white blood cells), antibodies, vitamin K, and protein. It has been suggested by Lewis (2010) that the withholding of colostrum may have been a contributing factor towards the deficiency diseases observed at Poundbury.

A final aspect of the skeletal pathologies of the children at Poundbury that warrants special attention is the prevalence of what were initially identified as healed rib fractures by Lewis (2010). Lewis (2012) has since reinterpreted these as thalassaemic rib lesions. This palaeopathological information provides indirect evidence of mobility, because thalassaemia is endemic to the Mediterranean but not Britain. Another recent study of health in Roman Britain was undertaken by Jenny (2011) on the cemetery at Butt Road, Colchester. A much smaller proportion of children were present at this site compared to Poundbury. Skeletal preservation at the site was generally poor, and it is possible that taphonomic factors are responsible for this under-representation. Almost half of the non-adults exhibited the pathological condition cribra orbitalia, a non-specific indicator of poor health linked to anaemia (Walker et al. 2009). This condition appears as holes or perforations in the orbits of the skull. Jenny (2011: 166) found that more children buried with grave goods had cribra orbitalia than those without and concluded that grave goods are not reflective of socio-economic status. Of course, the implication in Jenny's interpretation is that skeletal health *is* correlated with status, (p. 310) which is not always the case, as illustrated by the Poundbury data. Similarly, at the Romano-British site of Baldock, Griffin and colleagues (2011) note that those individuals buried in graves with furnishings tended to have poorer health in childhood than those without. They conclude from this that the inclination was for 'social climbers to feel the need to advertise their newfound status and identities through material display' (Griffin et al. 2011: 546). However, the types of items classed as grave furnishings in this study also included 'animal bones' and 'rubbing stones'—not the kind of extravagant goods that one would associate with conspicuous displays of wealth. The relationship between health and status is complex, and interpretations of the osteological evidence in this regard is further complicated by the non-specific nature of the lesions included in the above studies and the paradoxical nature of lesion expression (that is, skeletons with lesions may represent healthier individuals with stronger immune systems, while those without lesions may have died before their skeletons were affected) (Wood et al. 1992).

The bioarchaeological data form a rich seam of evidence from which to make important inferences concerning past perceptions and care of children in Roman Britain. However, the palaeopathological data are complex to interpret and we must be careful not to be overly simplistic in the correlations made between skeletal indicators of poor health and cultural indicators of 'wealth'. Techniques of analysis are developing rapidly, and it is

likely that skeletal data will play an increasingly prominent role in the exploration of childhood in Roman Britain.

The Funerary Evidence

> If you lose your parents you're an orphan; if you lose your husband you're a widow and if you lose your wife you're a widower … But there's no word for losing your child. It's as though it's so terrible they couldn't even give it a name.
>
> (Sally Holland, whose only child died aged 14 years; in Joanna Moorhead, *Guardian,* Saturday, 6 June 2009).

The funerary context has long been exploited as an important conduit for understanding perceptions of childhood in Roman Britain, not least, because this material provides a direct connection between children of different ages and material evidence in the form of ritual treatment. It thus allows archaeologists to integrate the bioarchaeological and funerary data as a means of assessing past perceptions of childhood. Studies of the burial treatment of children from Roman Britain in relation to age-at-death have demonstrated some interesting patterns in terms of spatial aspects of deposition, in addition to grave-good inclusions (for example, type and quantity) as well as the provisioning of coffins. A review of the findings of some of these studies is presented here.

(p. 311) The Newborn: Between Person and Non-Person

Infants were often the recipients of a distinct burial practice in Roman Britain as well as elsewhere in the empire and, consequently, have attracted considerable discussion in the archaeological literature. In most regions in Britain, infants have been excavated, often in substantial numbers, from within and around settlements and villas rather than formal cemetery sites (Scott 1991, 1992, 1999, 2001; Mays 1993, 2003; Strück 1993; Pearce 2001; Gowland and Chamberlain 2002; Moore 2009; Mays and Eyers 2011). This differential treatment of infants in death has generally been interpreted in terms of either ritual (though one un-related to the funerary concerns of the infant) or disposal of the unwanted child (e.g. Cocks 1921; Watts 1989; Mays 1993, 2003). Intrinsic to the latter interpretation are preconceptions concerning a lack of emotional attachment to young infants in response to either high infant mortality or the practice of infanticide. This form of 'demographic determinism' has been disputed by a number of authors (Golden 1988). Interpretations of these burials solely in terms of the disposal of the body implies a passivity that denies the agency of infants to effect those around them emotionally, physically, and economically (Gowland et al. 2014).

Direct historical evidence for infanticide in Roman Britain does not exist, and historical evidence from Rome refers not to the direct killing of infants, but to the 'putting-out' or abandonment of an infant (Boswell 1998). While these may lead to ultimately the same outcome—the death of the infant—they are conceptually very different and have different archaeological traces. Much of the historical evidence indicates that a large proportion of these infants were subsequently taken in and raised by others (e.g. Grubbs 2010). Leaving a child potentially to be brought up by strangers is not the same as the direct and violent act of killing. Crucially, in terms of the archaeological evidence, the latter would lead to a body whereas the former would not (even were the child to die, the body of an exposed infant is likely to be promptly dispersed by animals). The conflation of infanticide and abandonment has been resoundingly critiqued within the historical literature, but this does not appear to have filtered through to archaeological discussions of Roman infancy (Gowland et al. 2014).

One of the most vociferous proponents of the infanticide theory has been Mays (1993, 2003; Mays and Eyers 2011), who has argued that the age distribution of infants recovered from Romano-British settlements exhibits a pronounced neonatal peak, incompatible with what one would expect from natural mortality. Gowland and Chamberlain (2002) subsequently reassessed this evidence using a new methodology and concluded that the ageing method used by Mays created biased results. When a different method was employed, the age distribution obtained was compatible with that expected when stillborn infants, as well as neonates, were accorded similar burial rites (that is, a much broader range of ages at death). In other words, no osteological evidence was found to substantiate interpretations of infanticide (Gowland and Chamberlain 2002). Mays (2003) and Mays and Eyers (2011), however, continue to interpret the evidence in terms (p. 312) of infanticide—most recently in relation to the analysis of thirty-three infants from Yewden Villa, Hambledon (Mays and Eyers 2011).

It is important to note that the ages of the vast majority of infants buried within settlements and villas range from approximately 24 gestational weeks to approximately 2 months of age, after which they tend to be accorded different burial rites (Gowland 2001; Moore 2009). Moore's survey (2009) of this practice in Roman Britain revealed that 76 per cent of the infants were perinates and neonates aged between birth and 1 month post-partum. This phenomenon is, therefore, a repeated funerary ritual associated with a very specific age group. The vast majority of these infants were buried within domestic contexts; beneath the floors of general domestic rooms or, when buried externally, they were close to the domestic building (Moore 2009).

The issue of when a foetus is considered a human being is much debated within modern western society. For example, technological advances relating to the imaging of the foetus *in utero* have contributed to the shifting boundaries of personhood in contemporary society (Gowland et al., 2014). The conferment of personhood is a fluid construct and for many societies does not begin with birth. Historical evidence relating to Rome indicates that an infant attained an individual social identity only on the day that it was named (the *lustratio*)—a ceremony that took place on the eighth day after birth for females and the

ninth for males (Weidemann 1989; Rawson 1991). Other historical evidence indicates that infants were not perceived to have attained true personhood prior to teething and, possibly, walking and talking (Watts 1989; Philpott 1991). The relevance of historical evidence relating to Rome for attitudes in Roman Britain is open to considerable debate, but, on the basis of such evidence, one could argue that the grouping of stillbirths and infant deaths is to be expected: they were all considered non-people and of little importance. But, if this were so, why bury them within houses and settlements, rather than simply dispose of them further from the dwelling space? The incorporation of the infant in death, firmly within the social sphere of the living, should not be dismissed so readily. Perhaps the burial of infants within or close to the domestic sphere was not because it was convenient for disposal (which can hardly have been so), but because the household represented the social world of that child: their burial was conducted within the small social arena of which they were a part (Gowland 2001). Moore (2009: 48) likewise argues that the burials of these infants was ‘not the random disposal of the unwanted or marginalised, but the result of careful choices and decisions relating to concepts associated with the physical and spiritual worlds, the infant was inherently ambiguous but was also, in certain senses, a being of power’.

Cemetery Evidence

When examining the burial treatment of children, it is of course important to consider this evidence in relation to the graves and grave-good assemblages included with individuals of all ages. By doing so, one can obtain a better sense of any age-related patterns in burial ritual spanning the entire life course, thus moving beyond the constraints of (p. 313) the child/adult dichotomy. Funerary studies of this nature are often limited to inhumation cemeteries owing to a dearth of full analyses currently undertaken on cremated remains (though see Pearce 1999). Consequentially, for Roman Britain, there is a bias towards later Roman cemeteries of the third and fourth centuries. A good example of one such cemetery is the late Roman cemetery of Lankhills in Winchester. This cemetery was excavated originally in the 1960s (Clarke 1979), though another substantial part of the site was excavated and published more recently (Booth et al. 2010). Gowland (2001, 2002) conducted a reanalysis of the ages-at-death of the skeletons from the earlier excavations and found distinctive age-related patterns in burial treatment, which will be summarized briefly. It was observed that grave-good deposition was strongly correlated with both age and sex. Children aged 4–12 years and females in their early twenties were buried with much greater quantities of grave goods than older females and younger children. As well as an increase in the quantity of grave goods from 4 years onwards, there was a shift towards the inclusion of those grave goods typically differentiated by sex. The burial evidence points to a transition around the age threshold of 4–7 years, which coincides with the expression of a more strongly signified gender identity. Likewise, at the Butt Road Cemetery, Colchester, Jenny (2011) found that only children from the age of 7 onwards were buried with hairpins. Literary evidence pertaining to

Rome also indicates that the perceived identity of children underwent a transition after the age of about 7 years, towards an identity that was more explicitly gendered (Harlow and Laurence 2002).

While approximately equal quantities of jewellery were recovered from the graves of adult females (96 items) and children (89 items) from the earlier excavations at the Lankhills site, there were differences in terms of the deposition of these items within the graves. Only 14 per cent of the items found with the females were worn, compared to 39 per cent with the immature skeletons. The wearing of jewellery among the children (4–12 year olds) appeared to be governed partly by the type of item. For example, necklaces were more likely to be worn, while finger rings were almost never worn. Either it was either considered inappropriate for children of this age to be wearing finger rings or it was functionally impossible if they were adult rings. If the latter, then the finger rings had a symbolic role within the graves of these children (Gowland 2001, 2002). Of the unworn items of jewellery, those buried with the children were more frequently buried near to the legs or feet, while those accompanying the adults tended to be buried next to the head. This pattern is not observed at all Romano-British cemeteries. For example, at Butt Road, Colchester, the reverse is true. While jewellery was much less frequent at this site, only 13 per cent of items buried with children were worn (the majority having been placed in piles next to the head) compared to 43 per cent buried with the adults. The important factor may not be whether the items were worn or not, but rather that a distinction was maintained between the adults and the young.

Another example from Lankhills concerns the burial of a belt set by the feet of a child aged 4–7 years. These belt sets were usually worn during burial, but were almost exclusively buried with older males. At the late Roman cemetery of Butt Road, Colchester, (p. 314) another child (aged 9–11 years) was buried with two belt sets that had been placed beside the head (Crummy et al. 1993). It is clear that, while the burial of these relatively rare grave goods occurred with children, it was either not appropriate for them to be worn or not practical owing to the object’s size. Either way, the symbolism of these grave goods has altered because of the age of the deceased, and this has been reinforced through their placement. It seems likely that these belt sets were associated with a particular status or position of power that could not have been held in life by one so young, but perhaps they would have been achieved or inherited had they lived longer. A parallel with the burial of late Roman belt sets can be drawn from O’Shea’s work (1995: 130) on the Mokrin Bronze Age cemetery in Hungary. O’Shea also found that badges of office, when buried with children, were not placed in the correct functional position in the grave. Instead, they could be placed, for example, by the feet, to symbolize the fact that the role was not actually held before death.

Literary sources from Rome refer to the display of the body of the deceased, especially of the elite, prior to the funeral (Toynbee 1985). Whether the coffin was opened or closed for view is not known; however, it has been suggested that at Lankhills and other sites in Roman Winchester the body was displayed (Pearce 1999: 166). Recent chemical analyses of burials from lead-lined coffins in Roman Britain have suggested that the bodies of some

individuals were embalmed with natural plant exudates, presumably to preserve the body (Brettell et al. 2014) (for further discussion of Romano-British burial practice, see Weekes, this volume). The recurrent distinction in the focus of deposition of grave goods would have reinforced a visual difference in burial display that was linked to an emphasis on different parts of the body that must be symbolic of a social identity related, at least in part, to age. This also demonstrates how different meanings can be conferred onto—and imbued by—the same items of material culture, depending not only on the gender of an individual but also on his or her stage in the life course. When considering grave-good assemblages, we are able not only to establish whether certain goods are associated with either a masculine or a feminine gender, but also to observe the fluidity of gender and status dynamics with age.

This analysis of the funerary evidence has been revealing in a number of ways. First, perceptions of infancy differ from our own in terms of the grouping of stillbirths and post-neonatal deaths outside the cemetery context. In the modern world it has been observed that ‘the social space of childhood is also a temporal phenomenon’ (James et al. 1998: 41). In other words, age identity is one means through which we manage social space: there are inappropriate spaces for individuals of different ages to occupy. In the Roman world we see that this is certainly true in death, with the burial of neonates frequently occurring within the domestic sphere. Within the ‘normative’ cemeteries, there are also age-related patterns in burial practice. For example, a shift in identity occurs around the 4–7-year age category extending to individuals of 8–12 years. This shift is associated with a greater expression of gendered identity, in death at least. The graves of these individuals are among the richest for the entire cemetery, and this increase in burial wealth may also indicate a concurrent increase in the social status of children upon reaching this age threshold, although direct correlations of this nature are problematic. (p. 315) It is possible that the wealth of these graves may instead relate to the sense of loss accompanying the untimely death of a child.

In the contemporary western world we have constructed a separate and distinctive material and social world of the child—one that both reflects and reinforces our perceptions of their specialness and vulnerability. This material distinction is absent from the cemetery evidence of Roman Britain and may indicate that the emphasis and perception of the lived reality of childhood were not based on difference, as they are today but, instead, that children played a much more integrated role in the structuring and functioning of Romano-British society (Gowland 2001).

Future Directions

Developments within the field of human bioarchaeology are providing exciting opportunities to explore past perceptions of childhood and childcare as never before. Isotopic studies of bones and teeth provide access to information on weaning practices, childhood diet, and mobility. Isotope samples taken from different tissues of the body provide information relating to different life-course stages. For example, in an adult, ribs samples may yield information for the couple of years prior to death, cortical bone for the last decade or longer, and teeth to childhood. A technique recently developed by Beaumont and colleagues (2013) has retrieved dietary isotope information on nineteenth-century Irish famine victims from multiple dentine increments within a single tooth. This technique thus provides high-resolution data for the months prior to death and, in this instance, poignantly revealed the deteriorating health of the children. Isotope information can, therefore, be used to construct chemical biographies of childhood experiences, even from adult remains. Such studies mean that skeletal remains should no longer be considered as providing simply a snapshot of an individual at the time of death but, instead, can yield a life-course perspective (Robb 2002; Gowland and Thompson 2013).

Likewise, developments in the palaeopathological analysis of growth and diagnosis of nutritional deficiency diseases have the potential to provide complementary data relating to dietary and cultural practices. It is the integration of these different strands of data that is crucial for providing a more informed interpretation of evidence for past constructions of childhood. Of course, these skeletal data are of limited meaning unless fully contextualized and analysed with regard to the cultural evidence from specific grave contexts, as well as a broader material understanding of Roman Britain and the empire at large. It is important that bioarchaeologists work closely with Roman archaeologists, including artefact specialists and experts in the economic history of the Roman Empire. Finally, over more recent years bioarchaeologists are showing a burgeoning interest in the integration of social theory into their studies of the hard tissues of the body (e.g. Gowland and Knüsel 2006; Sofaer 2006; Knudson and Stojanowski 2009; Agarwal and Glencross 2011; Gowland and Thompson 2013). The reconceptualization of the skeleton (p. 316) as a social entity is helping to propel the discipline forward so that its significance for debates concerning social identity generally and childhood specifically is fully realized.

Conclusions

Studies of childhood in Roman Britain are still comparatively scarce. While there is a huge and growing corpus of historical research on children and the family in the ancient world, this rarely touches on Britain, owing to a dearth of relevant sources. The archaeological evidence in this regard has so far been under-utilized. Likewise, the bioarchaeological data—the most direct form of evidence for Romano-British childhood—have been neglected. Studies of the skeletal remains, both isotopic and palaeopathological, have shown the richness and diversity of the information that can be retrieved. When fully integrated with the archaeological evidence for settlement type, diet, and environment, these data can yield important insights into the lives of children in Roman Britain. By adopting a life-course approach to the funerary evidence—that is, contextualizing the study of the younger individuals within the entire lifespan—it is possible to identify age-related transitions in gender and status. Some of these may coincide with historical evidence from Italy, but not always. A life-course perspective enables archaeologists more readily to identify those age thresholds that fall outside current or contemporaneous age paradigms, so that we might more readily arrive at an understanding of the perceptions of childhood in Roman Britain.

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