



GROWING UP IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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Ersin: Infant mortality in Rome was very high and around thirty percent of children would not even reach their first birthday and at least half did not live to ten but this did not stop their parents from entertaining dreams and ambitions for their children.

This is the tomb of Macrinus Maximus. It was set up by a father for his one-year old son. And although the infant died so young, he is depicted on horseback hunting down a wild beast with his dog beside him, surely reflecting his father's hopes that he would grow up as a brave and dashing young huntsman. This is really 'what could have been'. Because of the high mortality rate of children in ancient Rome, tombs like the one of Macrinus Maximus are sadly very common. There was a heightened superstition around children, and their parents would have given them amulets to shepherd them through this vulnerable period. The most well-known was the bulla which was given to boys.

These tokens are not found buried with children who died prematurely so we might assume that the bulla would be passed on to the next born child with the hope that it might be more effective this time.

And yet, besides descriptions of these kinds of rituals, we know very little about what it might have been like to grow up in ancient Rome. The material evidence we do have can be very hard to interpret.

Ersin: So what can you tell us about the objects within this cabinet?

Dr Zena Kamash: This is a lead coffin that was found in Cambridgeshire. It's very small but actually the child inside was only, probably, one year old, so was even smaller; and around it were found all of these figurines.

Ersin: So can we assume that these items are toys?

Zena: Probably not. When we found them before, they're votive offerings, so it's very difficult to know, really, whether they're toys or votive offerings.

Ersin: So did children within the Roman world have toys to play with?

Zena: We do occasionally find figurines that are jointed and can move around, but we – again – we just don't know if they were toys or not. But for me, I think, children can bring a

playful spirit to any object that they encounter in their life.

Ersin: In Rome, childhood was focused towards a single goal of becoming an adult. The point at which childhood ended would have been decided by the parents and was different for girls and boys.

A boy would reach manhood based on the physical changes to his body, usually between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. The transition was symbolised by the boy's donning of the *toga virilis*. He would dedicate his *bullae* to the household gods, in the rite of becoming a Roman citizen.

For girls, the end of childhood was marked by their marriage. This is the tomb of a 14 year old girl, Municia Suavis. She was already married, which was not that uncommon. On the night before her wedding she would have dedicated her dolls to Venus, symbolising her transition into adulthood. We have many more cases of girls just like Municia.

An inscription from a tomb describes the life of a woman called Veturia:

[quoting] *Here do I lie at rest, a married woman, Veturia by name and descent, the wife of Fortunatus, the daughter of Veturius. I lived for thrice nine years, poor me, and I was married for twice eight. I slept with one man, I was married to one man. After bearing six children, one of whom survives me, I died.*

Titus Iulius Fortunatus, centurion of the Second Legion Adiutrix Pia Fidelis, set this up for his wife: she was incomparable and notably respectful to him.

Zena: So a young woman would've married at an age of maybe about 11, much younger than we would expect today, and they would have several children and then we would expect them to die quite young as well. The usual age of mortality in the Roman world is around about 30.

Ersin: The case of Veturia was by no means an exception. Being a child in Rome was full of dangers, and those who survived did not enjoy the innocence and freedom of childhood. As we know, growing up was a constant race to maturity but at thirteen or fourteen how many children were ready for marriage, to become parents, and to face their responsibilities of adulthood?