

Growing up in the Roman empire

Remembering children: commemoration & emotional bonds

Infant mortality in ancient Rome was high; it is estimated that only around half of all children born would reach the age of ten. From a study of epitaphs, grave goods, and accounts of infant deaths, we can attempt to piece together Roman attitudes to child mortality, and the emotional bonds between parents and children.

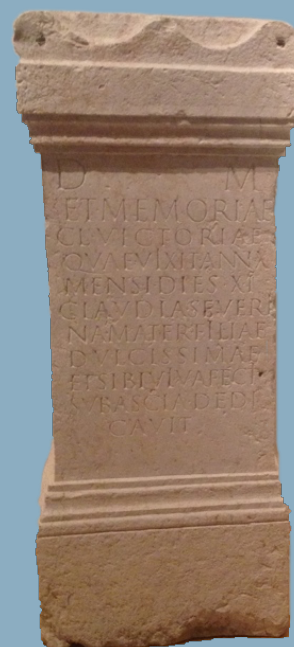
Do you think the high death rate of infants and children would have led parents to be less attached to their children?

Source 1: Mask and tomb of Claudia Victoria

This is a plaster cast of the face of a ten year old girl, Claudia Victoria, from Lugdunum (modern day Lyon, France). The plaster cast would have been used to create a wax death mask, which would have been kept by the family. The cast itself, unusually, was buried with the girl, as well as her toys. An inscription records that the monument was set up by Claudia Severina, the girl's mother.



... in the memory of Claudia Victoria, dead at the age of 10 years old, one month and eleven days; Claudia Severina, her mother, when she was still alive, raised this tomb to her beloved daughter, to herself and dedicated it ...



Mask and tombstone of Claudia Victoria, 1st century AD, Lyon (France).

Source 2: Altar to Anthus



DIIS MANIB[us] ANTHI ·
L[ucius] · IULIUS · GAMUS
PATER · FIL[io] · DULCISIM[o]

*To the departed spirits of Anthus:
his father, Lucius Julius Gamus [set
this up] for his very sweet son.*

Funerary altar, 1st century AD, found near Rome (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

Source 3: Sarcophagus of Marcus Cornelius Statius

This sarcophagus depicts stages in a boy's life. From left to right:
Mother nurses infant while father(?) looks on; father(?) holds infant; youth rides chariot
drawn by a goat; youth recites before tutor.



Sarcophagus of M. Cornelius Statius, 1st century AD, Louvre Museum (France).

Source 4: Sarcophagus of a young boy

Based on its size and decoration, this is the sarcophagus of a toddler. The course of his short life is shown from right to left. He is first shown as a swaddled infant in his mother's arms, riding in a carriage in the countryside. His father sits next to them (smaller version) with his arm tenderly around his wife's shoulder. The central scene depicts the boy pushing a wheeled frame as he learns to walk, and playing with a pet goose as a slightly older toddler. The left side shows the same family in a carriage, but now the boy is a toddler (smaller version) sitting on his father's lap; the winged Cupid flying above the horses indicates that the boy has died and this carriage ride symbolises his journey to the Underworld.



Marble sarcophagus, 2nd century AD (Baths of Diocletian, National Museums, Rome).

Thinking about the sources above:

What can we tell about parents' relationship with their children?

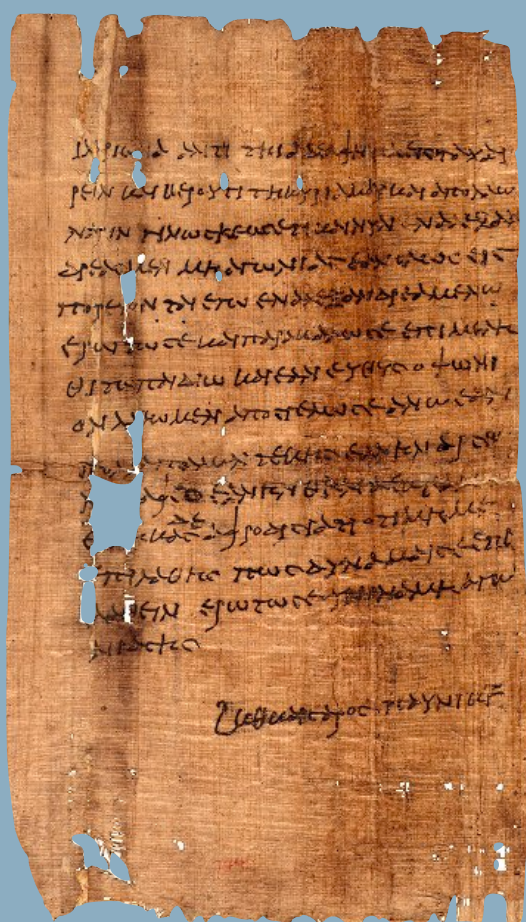
What can we tell about the lives of children from these monuments?

To what extent can we interpret people's emotions from inscriptions on tombs, and to what extent are these expressions formulaic?

Source 5: Letter from Roman Egypt

This is a letter that is part of an archive called the Oxyrhynchus Papyri. A large number of papyrus fragments were found in the waste heap of an ancient Roman town called Oxyrhynchus (in Greek: the City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish). Due to the extremely dry conditions, these fragments of paper have been preserved through the ages, and include letters written by ordinary people. Most of these were written in Ancient Greek, the language most commonly used in the East of the Roman Empire. The papyri are now hosted and studied in Oxford.

This letter is written by a man to a woman (his wife? his sister? his daughter...?), in which he urges her not to raise her baby if it is female. Children who were 'exposed' were abandoned to be raised by others or to die.



Hilarion to his dearest Alis, heartiest greetings, and to my dear Berous and Apollonarion. Know that we are still even now in Alexandria. Do not worry if when all the others return I remain in Alexandria. I beg and beseech of you to take care of the little child, and as soon as we receive wages I will send them to you. If - good luck to you! - you bear a child, if it is a male, let it live; if it is a female, expose it. You told [our friend] Aphrodisias [to tell me], 'Do not forget me.' How can I forget you? I beg you therefore not to worry.

Oxyrhynchus papyrus 4.744 (Egypt, 1BC).

Why do you think Hilarion gives this advice to Alis?

Why do you think this letter should display a different attitude to the monuments you looked at above?

Do you think being a parent was different in Ancient Rome to today?