

Roman birth rites of passage revisited

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In classical antiquity, as in most traditional societies, very young children, especially newborn babies, were subject to specific rituals associated with their particular liminal status, between two worlds — alive, but not yet fully social beings. Long believed to have left no trace, these inconspicuous actors of past societies are now part of a new field of research on childbirth and infancy within the broader field of childhood studies. The paucity of textual sources is compensated by an interdisciplinary approach confronting different types of evidence, especially archaeological. A renewed attention to babies' material culture is offering promising new insights on various practices, such as the use of breast pumps or of swaddling rings.¹ Results obtained for other periods and societies also allow useful transfers of questions on various topics, such as the function of babies' 'moulding' or the use of teething amulets.²

In this paper I will explore the nature of the ambivalent status of newborn babies and examine how and to what extent Roman birth rites contributed to "making human" infants; I will also revisit the structure of these rites after the scheme conceptualized by A. van Gennep a century ago in *Les rites de passage* (Paris 1909), a seminal book widely used by anthropologists and classicists.³ Van Gennep distinguished similar schemes in rites accompanying transitions in the life cycle, such as birth, coming of age, wedding, or death. He identified a tripartite structure composed of separation from one status, followed by an intermediate, liminal, period ending with rites of aggregation into a new status. The concept, often used as an epistemological tool to discuss initiation and maturation rites, has also been applied to birth rites in various cultures, though more rarely in Antiquity, partly because of the shortage of evidence.⁴

A better understanding of the structure and flexibility of birth rites of passage is important not only as a contribution to ancient rituals, but also to childhood and gender studies. The reconstruction of early childhood is a neglected part of the history of normative and culturally conditioned values and behaviours. Attitudes to infants also reveal a society's capacity to manage life crises.

I will thus first review the steps leading from delivery to the ceremony of the *dies lustricus* 8 or 9 days later, commonly described as the second, social birth of the child, with the help of

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- 1 The pioneering work of G. Coulon, *L'enfant en Gaule romaine* (Paris 1994, revised edn. 2004), provides a wealth of material from Gallo-Roman society, as does the exhibition catalogue on Roman Gaul edited by D. Gourevitch, A. Moirin and N. Rouquet, *Maternité et petite enfance dans l'Antiquité romaine* (cat. expo Bourges) (Bourges 2003). On breast pumps, see N. Rouquet, "Les biberons, les tire-lait ou les tribulations d'une tubulure peu commune ...", *ibid.* 171-77; on swaddling rings, *ibid.* 209-10. On coming into life in Antiquity, see also V. Dasen (ed.), *Naissance et petite enfance dans l'Antiquité. Colloque Fribourg 2001* (Fribourg 2004); J. Neils and J. Oakley (edd.), *Coming of age in ancient Greece. Images of childhood from the classical past* (New Haven, CT 2004); A. Cohen and J. Rutter (edd.), *Constructions of childhood in ancient Greece and Italy* (Hesperia Suppl. 41, 2007); V. Dasen, "Étapes et circonstances occasionnelles de la vie. Naissance et petite enfance, Grèce," in *ThesCRA VI* forthcoming; O. de Cazanove, "Naissance et petite enfance, Rome," *ibid.*
 - 2 E.g., M.-F. Morel and C. Rollet, *Des bébés et des hommes: traditions et modernité des soins aux tout-petits* (Paris 2000); D. Bonnet and L. Pourchez (edd.), *Du soin au rite dans l'enfance* (Ramonville 2007).
 - 3 *The rites of passage*, transl. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee (Chicago 1960); J. Hainard and R. Kaehr (edd.), *Naître, vivre et mourir, actualité de van Gennep. Essais sur les rites de passage* (Neuchâtel 1981).
 - 4 On initiation rites, see, e.g., M. W. Padilla, *Rites of passage in ancient Greece: literature, religion, society* (Lewisburg, ME 1999). Birth rites are less often discussed: "birth was a ritual, although its structure can only be dimly perceived", explains R. Garland, *The Greek way of life* (London 1990) 104. The concept is usefully applied by, e.g., P. Garnsey, "Child rearing in ancient Italy," in D. I. Kertzer and R. P. Saller (edd.), *The family in Italy from antiquity to the present* (New Haven, CT 1991) 48-65 (repr. in *Cities, peasants and food in classical antiquity. Essays in social and economic history* [Cambridge 1998] 253-71), but this is not systematic. B. Rawson, *Children and childhood in Roman Italy* (Oxford 2003) 95-113, details the different steps surrounding birth in Rome, but without referring to the structure of the rites, nor to van Gennep.

medical, anthropological, and visual sources which focus on a series of key moments. The second part concerns archaeological evidence of unfinished birth rites, interrupted by death, which confirm or reveal the different stages of the process. In the last decade, numerous Roman burials of foetuses and newborn babies have been discovered which throw a new light on the nature of infants' liminality and the duration of this particular status.

I. From birth to the *dies lustricus*

At first glance, Roman birth rites offer a perfect example of Van Gennep's threefold sequence composed of separation, margin, and aggregation. This scheme has long been applied to Roman practices: it was assumed that separation from the mother was achieved by the lifting up of the newborn from the ground by the father; a marginal time followed where the child — not yet human, almost non-existent — may be abandoned or killed, until social aggregation took place at the *dies lustricus* or *dies nominis* with the child's naming (often compared with Christian baptism).⁵ In the Imperial period, within 30 days after the *dies lustricus*, the child was then officially registered.⁶ A closer look, however, comparing textual and visual representations, reveals that the sequence is much more complex, and that the child emerges as an individual in the domestic and religious spheres well before the *dies lustricus*.

Separation: from birth to the first bath

The first step has already been thoroughly revisited by Th. Köves-Zulauf and B. D. Shaw, who demonstrated that legal paternal power did not need a lifting up ceremony: the ritual is a 19th-c. creation based on a metaphorical literary expression (*tollere* or *suscipere liberos*) which does not describe a formal physical act.⁷ The father had indeed the right to decide to rear or to reject the child, but no specific recognition act was legally required at birth. Birth alone created the *patria potestas*, provided the child was born from a *iustum matrimonium* between two free citizens.

If the legal infant-raising ritual does not exist, what is the real function of the gesture in that phase? New evidence may be found in medical texts. The stages surrounding birth can be reconstructed with the help of the 2nd-c. Soranus of Ephesus, who wrote a treatise on *Gynaikēia* (gynaecology), meant for the training of midwives who were the main actors in the first days of life of the child.⁸ Key moments are placed at stages revealing specific cultural representations of the child's body. In the second book, we read that the very first step, after delivery, does not start with cutting the umbilical cord. The first gesture of the midwife, after announcing the sex of the newborn, is to put the child upon the earth in order to examine carefully its condition. This inspection is crucial because her task is to determine if the newborn "is worth rearing" (2.10). The child must cry vigorously and be "perfect in all its parts, members and senses: that is ducts, namely of the ears, nose, pharynx, urethra, anus", all must be free from obstruction, says Soranus. The description details the whole body, from head to toe, with an attention which reflects the newborn's fragility and the concern not to rejoice too soon at a time of very high infant mortality. It also mirrors the Roman sensitivity towards physical abnor-

5 E.g., A. van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (Paris 1909) 229-30; F. Cumont, *Lux perpetua* (Paris 1949) 307 ff.

6 The registration concerns only children of Roman citizens: F. Schulz, "Roman registers of birth and birth certificates," *JRS* 32 (1942) 78-91; id., "Roman registers of birth and birth certificates. Part II," *JRS* 33 (1943) 55-64.

7 T. Köves-Zulauf, *Römische Geburtsriten* (Munich 1990); B. D. Shaw, "Raising and killing children: two Roman myths," *Mnemosyne* 54 (2001) 31-77. For a traditional interpretation of the father's gesture, see, e.g., N. Belmont, "Levana ou comment 'élever' les enfants," *AnnESC* 1973, 77-89.

8 *Soranus' Gynecology*, transl. O. Temkin (Baltimore, MD 1991). An alternative interpretation is that the prime function of Soranus' treatise was to teach the Roman *pater familias* how to identify the best midwife and wet-nurse to hire. See, e.g., A. E. Hanson and M. Green, "Soranus of Ephesus: *methodicorum princeps*," in *ANRW* II.37.2 (1994) especially 1025-29.

mality, going back to the Republican period.⁹ At the time of Soranus, signs of divine wrath or cosmic disorder were no longer searched for on the child's body, but the concern for anomalies underlies the description. Omens for the child's future were deduced from various bodily signs, such as the untimely presence of teeth or birthmarks;¹⁰ major disfunctions could still cause rejection, exposure or infanticide, as implied by the last sentence, "and by conditions contrary to those mentioned, the infant not worth the rearing is recognized". The assertion, however, should not be interpreted literally, as we know from other sources that children born with physical defects could be accepted and reared.¹¹

This physical test places the newborn in a liminal stage, between life and death, before the separation from its mother is completed. Only when the second delivery is over, that of the afterbirth, does the midwife lift the child, says Soranus, to sever the umbilical cord (2.11). Hippocratic authors also insist on waiting for the afterbirth before proceeding to omphalotomy.¹² In various cultures, waiting for the expulsion of the placenta is crucial, as only then is the child really born.¹³ The ancients do not provide an explanation: Soranus only says that the newborn thereby had a little rest after the delivery. Other preoccupations too may exist. A. E. Hanson suggests that as long as the umbilical cord was not detached, the legitimacy of the newborn could be proven, at least in the female line. Such suspicion was not uncommon, especially in the case of posthumous children.¹⁴ Lifting the child from the ground was thus a decisive moment, the sign of the child's viability, but the act occurred in the power of the midwife. Only then did the father, if present, order the administration of the first care, thereby declaring to accept the child, but without any formal ritual. The practice suggests that a stillborn or unwelcome child, if buried, was buried with its placenta, which unfortunately leaves no archaeological trace. Oddly, there is no mention of the treatment of the afterbirth, despite its

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- 9 M. Delcourt, *Stérilités mystérieuses et naissances maléfiques dans l'antiquité classique* (Liège 1938); V. Rosenberger, *Gezähmte Götter. Das Prodigienwesen der römischen Republik* (Stuttgart 1998); A. Allély, "Les enfants malformés et considérés comme *prodigia* à Rome et en Italie sous la République," *REA* 105 (2003) 127-56; ead., "Les enfants malformés et handicapés à Rome sous le Principat," *REA* 106 (2004) 73-101; B. Cuny-Le Callet, *Rome et ses monstres* (Grenoble 2005).
- 10 Plin., *NH* 7.68-89 (the omen is good or bad according to the sex of the child). Birthmarks are also observed. Augustus had bodily marks reproducing the constellation of the Great (or Little) Bear which predicted his destiny as *kosmokrator*: Suet., *Aug.* 80; V. Dasen, "Empreintes maternelles," in *La mère/La Madre* (Micrologus 16; Firenze 2009) 35-54. See also the *omina* deduced from the birthing position, also in the Imperial period, e.g., Plin., *NH* 7.46 (Agrippa, after *aegre partus*: bad omen); N. Belmont, *Les signes de la naissance* (Paris 1971).
- 11 E.g., Plin., *NH* 7.69 (about girls born with closed sexual organs, of bad omen, but who are allowed to survive); *NH* 11.244 (on children born with 6 fingers). It was in no way a "merciless selection", as some scholars believed (e.g., R. Etienne, "La conscience médicale antique et la vie des enfants," *Annales de démographie historique. Enfant et sociétés* [1973] 15-46). For further references on handicapped children, see R. Garland, *The eye of the beholder. Deformity and disability in the Graeco-Roman world* (London 1995); V. Dasen, "L'enfant qui ne grandit pas," *Medicina nei secoli. Storia dell'handicap infantile in Italia* 18 (2006) 431-57; D. Gourevitch, "L'enfant handicapé à Rome: mise au point et perspectives," *ibid.* 459-77. Cf. the siamese twin babies found in a tomb in Rhodes (Roman period): V. Dasen, *Jumeaux, jumelles dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine* (Kilchberg 2005) 53-54.
- 12 E.g., *On Superfetation* 8.1-2 (Littré VIII.481-83); *Diseases of women* 1.46 (Littré VIII.105-7). On the procedure, see A. E. Hanson, "A division of labour. Roles for men in Greek and Roman births," *Thamyris* 1.2 (1994) especially 190-95.
- 13 See in general P. Erny, *Les premiers pas dans la vie de l'enfant d'Afrique noire. Naissance et première enfance. Éléments pour une ethnologie de l'éducation* (Paris 1999) 110 and, more specifically, C. Rivière, "La naissance chez les Evé du Togo," in *L'enfance en milieu traditionnel en Afrique Noire = Journal des Africanistes* 51 (1981) 71-96; Morel and Rollet (*supra* n.2) 57-59. I am grateful to M.-F. Morel for these references.
- 14 Hanson (*supra* n.12) 175-76 and 190. Cf. the description of the crowded birth scene of a widow: *Dig.* 25.4.1.10 (Ulpian); Rawson (*supra* n.4) 100. There is no trace in written records of the fear of "changelings", newborns replaced by the evil or sick offsprings of supernatural creatures: J. Gélis, *L'arbre et le fruit. La naissance dans l'Occident moderne (XVIe-XIXe siècle)* (Paris 1984) 480-82; Morel and Rollet (*supra* n.2) 73-74.



Fig. 1. Glass paste. London, BM 3079 (© The Trustees of the British Museum).

Fig. 2. Gem. Drawing after D. A. Bracci, *Memorie degli antichi incisori che scolpirono i loro nomi in gemme e cammei* (Florence III (Leipzig 1900) 296, fig. 155. 1786, repr. 1978) 174, pl. 17.1.

Fig. 3. Glass paste. Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire. Drawing after A. Furtwängler, *Die antiken Gemmen in gemme e cammei* (Florence III (Leipzig 1900) 296, fig. 155. 1786, repr. 1978) 174, pl. 17.1.

importance. Only a few texts mention traditions relating to children “born in the caul” (*pil-leum*), enveloped in the amniotic membrane or born with fragments of it over the head. The caul was either kept or stolen, and was sold as a talisman providing good luck.¹⁵

A series of glass pastes and gems of the Imperial period seem to refer to the determining of the physical soundness of the newborn and propose divine models for the midwife. Three women stand before a child lying or sitting naked on the ground. They hold attributes which allowed C. Weiss to identify the women as the Parcae (or Moirae) who fix the child's fate.¹⁶ On the London paste (fig. 1),¹⁷ the woman on the left holds a *volumen*, the figure on the right a balance and a torch, also an attribute of Juno Lucina (or Diana Lucifera). Both look at the central, frontal figure, who stands beside the child and holds a spindle and a distaff. The Bracci gem and Geneva paste offer an interesting variant: the Parcae hold no object, but a torch lies beside the child (figs. 2-3).¹⁸ It is tempting to go one step further and see in these scenes an allusion to the inspection by the midwife. The possession of spindle and distaff by the central figure on the London gem could metaphorically refer to the cutting of the umbilical cord, implying that the midwife is the human doublet of the Parcae or Moirai, like them determining life or death¹⁹ and prospects for the future.²⁰ Despite its symbolical importance and corroboration by many superstitions reported by Soranus,²¹ the cutting of the umbilical cord is never depicted, probably because it is still part of the delivery process, which is seldom shown.²²

Biographical sarcophagi with life-course scenes (2nd-3rd c.) focus on the next moment, the first bath (figs. 4-5).²³ Its importance stems from at least two considerations. Socially, the

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- 15 SHA, *Diadum.* 16.4.2 (midwives sell it to lawyers, “for it is said that this brings luck to those who plead”).
- 16 C. Weiss, “*Deae fata nascentibus canunt*,” in Kotinos, *Festschrift für Erika Simon* (Mainz 1992) 366-74; V. Dasen, s.v. “Moirai,” *LIMC, Supplementum* (2009) 338-39.
- 17 H. B. Walters, *Catalogue of the engraved gems and cameos Greek, Etruscan and Roman in the British Museum* (London 1926) 294, no. 3079 pl. 31; Weiss *ibid.* 368, pl. 79.4; Dasen *ibid.* 338, add.5, pl. 166.
- 18 Weiss *ibid.* 367-68, pl. 79.3; Dasen *ibid.* 338, add.2 and 4, fig. and pl. 165. See also an agate with the same motif (ex-coll. A. Morrison): A. Furtwängler, *Die antiken Gemmen III* (Leipzig 1900) 296 fig. 156; Dasen *ibid.* 338, add.3, fig.
- 19 She can easily kill the newly-born. Amm. Marc. (16.10.19) reports that the midwife of the empress Helena, wife of Julian the Apostate, was accused of bribery; she was suspected to have murdered the newborn son by cutting the umbilical cord more than it should be in order to deprive the emperor of an heir.
- 20 Cf. supra n.10, the *omina* taken from the birthing position of the child and from other physical signs.
- 21 Such as avoiding iron, which would be an ill omen, and preferring to use a glass, a potsherd, a reed or breadcrust: Sor., *Gyn.* 2.11; Rufus of Ephesus *ap.* Oribasius, *Libr. Inc.* 12 (ed. Daremberg/Bussemaker III [Paris 1858] 117-18).
- 22 See A. Dierichs, *Von der Götter Geburt und der Frauen Niederkunft* (Mainz 2002); G. Coulon, “Images et imaginaire de la naissance dans l’Occident romain,” in Dasen, *Naissance* (supra n.1) 209-25.
- 23 R. Amedick, *Vita privata. Die Sarkophage mit Darstellungen aus dem Menschenleben* (Die antiken Sarko-



Fig. 4. Sarcophagus. Agrigento, Museo archeologico Regionale (drawing author).



Fig. 5. Sarcophagus. Museo Torlonia (DAI Rome neg. 33.11).

event is significant because caring for the child implies that it has been declared viable, that it is accepted by the parents, and that the family starts to cheer up.²⁴ It is also a symbolical introduction into earthly life through contact with the elements (water). The bath marks a complete separation from the mother's womb. Traces of uterine life are washed away and the special coating of the newborn's skin (*uernix caseosa*) is gently rubbed with fine salt, as Soranus

phagreliefs I.4; Berlin 1991) 60-63, pls. 53.3-5; 57; 59.1; 60.1; 62.1-4 and 6; 63; 64.1; 74.2; N. B. Kampen, "Biographical narration and Roman funerary art," *AJA* 85 (1981) especially 53-55. The bath scene occurs regularly in depictions of divine births: F. Matz, *Die dionysischen Sarkophage* (Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs IV.3; Berlin 1969) especially pls. 80-91, nos. 195-206.

24 This tradition explains why Suetonius (*Claud.* 27) mentions with disapproval how Claudius had his daughter Claudia exposed, though the first care had been administered. In other cultures, it similarly implies admission into the familial group: Erny (supra n.13) 146.

advises (2.12). The midwife also squeezes out the mucus in the nose, cleanses the mouth and the ears, and proceeds to dilate the anus in order to stimulate the excretion of the *meconium*.

We know of societies (e.g., in Kenya) in which the newborn's bath is full of aromatic ingredients, like a soup, which must eliminate the smell of uterine life and impregnate the baby with new scents, those of herbs from the territory of its community.²⁵ A similar care may be seen in Rome, where less exotic ingredients, such as honey, olive oil, the juice of barley, fenugreek or mallow, are used for the bath, even the injecting of olive-oil in the eyes, "for it is good thus to wash off the thickest moisture in them; if this is not done, in most cases the nurslings become dim-sighted" (*Gyn.* 2.13). With the first bath a first passage is thus in a sense completed: the child is physically separated from its mother and uterine life, and is accepted into the familial group.

In other cultures, reports Soranus (2.12), the bath determined the life or death of the child; cold water is used by the Germans and the Scythians, wine, sometimes mixed with brine, or the urine of a child, or myrtle and oak gall.²⁶ Soranus adds that one assumed that the child "not worth the rearing" did not survive.

In life-course scenes, the importance of this bath is stressed by the supernatural presence of the Parcae or Moirae. They appear on several sarcophagi fixing the destiny of the newborn.²⁷ On a sarcophagus in Agrigento (fig. 4),²⁸ the midwife washes the child in a basin before the seated mother who reclines back onto a chair, a pose alluding to her recovering from the delivery. At the back, three women stand beside a column on which sits a globe; the woman on the left touches the globe, the second holds a *volumen*, while the attribute of the third is not visible. The scene reunites two successive moments: that of the biological birth, when the destiny and a horoscope are set,²⁹ and that of the bath taking place soon after, synonymous with the entry into life and into the family. It may be noted that iconography insists on the vigour of the newborn, represented as an active baby, often moving and extending its arms towards the mother. On the sarcophagus in the Museo Torlonia (fig. 5), we see the image of a healthy child, shown conventionally as older than in reality. The midwife always presents the child to the mother and no man is present: the environment, human and divine, is entirely female.

Shaping the newborn: swaddling, massage and feeding

This active child is soon subject to a special treatment, the "firming up" of its body, which is judged too soft, and indeed so malleable that it can be shaped like wax. Soranus and other authors explain that it is possible to modify this plastic body by massage, modelling "every part so that imperceptibly that which is not yet fully formed is shaped into its natural characteristics" (*Gyn.* 2.32), and improving parts for aesthetic reasons, such as shaping a nose.³⁰ The idea is already present in the Hippocratic treatise *On Regimen* 1.19 (Littré VI.492-93): "curriers stretch, rub, comb and wash. Children are tended the same way". Special emphasis is put on the limbs and mobility, in an attempt to squeeze materials of life in the uterus which may have remained in the joints, as Soranus explains: "furthermore, she should bend back the limbs toward the spine, moving the tip of the right foot towards the tip of the left hand and

25 Erny *ibid.* 118-19; B. Fontanel and C. d'Harcourt, *Bébés du monde* (Paris 1998) 28-29. See also Ch. Furth, "Concepts of pregnancy, childbirth and infancy in Ch'ing Dynasty China," *J. Asian Studies* Feb. 1987, 20-21 (herbs which must expel 'poison' from uterine life); F. Lestage, *Naissance et petite enfance dans les Andes péruviennes. Pratiques, rites, représentations* (Paris 1999) 135 (herbs must expell a 'bad humour').

26 See Plut., *Lyc.* 16.1-3, on the inspection of the newborn and the washing with wine as test in Sparta, "for it is said that epileptic and sickly infants are thrown into convulsions by the strong wine and lose their senses". Also Arist., *Pol.* 1336a 12-18.

27 S. de Angeli, *s.v.* "Moirai," *LIMC* VI (1992) 636-48. Cf. Tert., *De anima* 39.

28 De Angeli *ibid.* no 38.

29 Cf. Auson., *Parentalia* 11, on the untimely death of his young grandson, which was announced by his name, Pastor; the baby received it because a flute was heard at his birth, and his life was as fleeting as the sound of the *calamis*.

30 *Gyn.* 2.34.

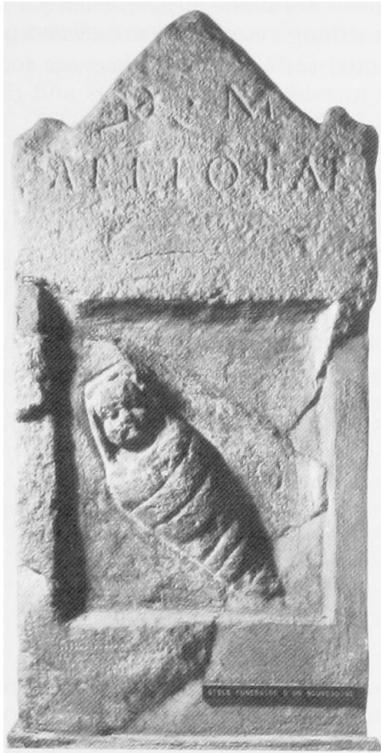


Fig. 6. Stela of Aeliola, Metz, Musées de la Cour d'Or 4364 (G. Coulon).



Fig. 7. Onyx alabastron. Berlin, Staatl. Mus. FG 11362 (photo museum).

the left towards the right. For thus the sinews of the joints are made supple, each [of which] becomes more mobile by the various rotations, and if something viscous has penetrated into the joints while the organism was formed, it is squeezed out" (2.32). Similar ideas are found in other cultures, exemplified again in Kenya, which use massages to make joints and the legs supple — a highest concern.³¹

Swaddling completed this work. It aimed primarily at preventing distortions in the limbs,³² but symbolically the practice also has significance: the erect stance defines Mankind, and swaddling was believed to contribute to transforming a small shrivelled animal into a human, helping it grow as straight as possible. It thus actively constructed a human identity.³³ The idea is a product of the *longue durée*: "some people believe that children would walk on all fours if they were not swaddled," said Nicolas Brouzet in his *Essai sur l'éducation médicale des enfans* (Paris 1754). Roman swaddling made not only human, but also male and female. The type of swaddling differed according to the sex of the child: "in females, one should bind the parts at the breast more tightly, yet keeping the region of the loins loose, for in women this form is more becoming," says Soranus (2.15). The practice is not without danger. In the 2nd. c. A.D. Galen calls attention to ignorant midwives or nurses who deform the child with irregular swaddling that compresses the thorax too strongly and unevenly.³⁴

Despite their importance, these two procedures, swaddling and massage, are not shown in art. We see only the result: depictions of swaddled babies (fig. 6) characterizing a child of a specific age, starting after birth but extending well beyond the first week, and after the *dies lustricus*.³⁵ For Soranus (2.15), swaddling may stop after 40 or 60 days only, depending on the child's constitution.³⁶

Human food is introduced slowly. The newborn baby must first eliminate uterine food. "Its whole body is full of maternal food which it ought to digest first," says Soranus (2.17). The internal separation process takes longer than the delivery itself, as evidenced by the excretion of the *meconium*, stimulated by the midwife, and the squeezing out of viscosities in the limbs, described by Soranus. Like adults, the neonate can suffer from a change of place and of regimen which can produce diseases.³⁷ One or two days' diet is commonly prescribed. The newborn only gets hydromel, honey boiled in water — not so much an earthly food but a heavenly nutriment: elaborated from dew, fallen from the sky, honey should keep away evil and diseases, as well as provide divine inspiration.³⁸ This diet belongs, like swaddling, to the *longue durée*: it was

31 Babies' faculties are dulled by mucous, explains Hippocrates, *Eight Month's Child* 9.8 (Littré VIII.450). On the meaning of bath and massage in non-European cultures, see Erny (supra n.13) 179; Morel and Rollet (supra n.2) 203-8; Bonnet and Pourchez (supra n.2).

32 Plut., *On the Education of Children* 3D.

33 D. Gourevitch, "Comment rendre à sa véritable nature le petit monstre humain?" in Ph. J. van der Eijk, H. F. J. Horstmannshoff and P. J. Schrijvers (edd.), *Ancient medicine in its socio-cultural context*, I (Amsterdam 1994) 239-60; S. R. Holman, "Molded as wax: formation and feeding of the ancient newborn," *Helios* 24 (1997) 77-95; V. Dasen, "'All children are dwarfs'. Medical discourse and iconography of children's bodies," *OJA* 27 (2008) 49-62.

34 *De morb. causis* 7 (Kühn 7.28-29); D. Bacalexii, "Responsabilités féminines: sages-femmes, nourrices et mères chez quelques médecins de l'Antiquité et de la Renaissance," *Gesnerus* 62 (2005) especially 8-9. L. Capasso interprets enthesopathic hyperostosis on babies' bones as possible traces of such strong swaddling: *I fuggiaschi di Ercolano: paleobiologia delle vittime dell'eruzione vesuviana del 79 d.C.* (Roma 2001), e.g. no. 122 (2-3 months old).

35 Coulon (supra n.1) 43-50; S. Deyts, "La femme et l'enfant au maillot en Gaule. Iconographie et épigraphie," in Dasen, *Naissance* (supra n.1) 227-37. See also O. de Cazanove, "Enfants en langes: pour quels vœux?" in G. Greco and B. Ferrara (edd.), *Doni agli dei. Il sistema dei doni votivi nei santuari* (Naples 2008) 271-84.

36 Plato (*Leg.* 7.789e) specifies that swaddling should last for two years, and that the nurse should carry children until the age of three "in order to avoid distorting their legs by overpressure while they are still young". Cf. Sor., *Gyn.* 2.43.

37 *Eight Month's Child* 12.1-4 (Littré VIII.456).

38 Cf. Ph. Borgeaud, "L'enfance au miel dans les récits antiques," in Dasen, *Naissance* (supra n.1) 113-26.

still in use in Europe at the beginning of the 20th c.³⁹ After these two days, the newborn gets maternal or a nurse's milk.

The dies lustricus

The ceremony of the *dies lustricus* marks the next decisive step in the child's life. Shaped like a human by swaddling and massages, fed like a human with milk, the baby receives a first social identity: an individual name, a *praenomen* which will be completed by the *nomen* of his *gens*. The calendar is gendered: the ceremony takes place 8 days after birth for girls, 9 for boys.⁴⁰ In Rome as in Greece, the reason for postponing the naming is partly associated with high infant mortality. Aristotle says that many children die within the first week, hence healthy babies are named only past that period.⁴¹ Plutarch refers to a transformation in the child's body, where the umbilical cord plays a central rôle: he explains that one must wait until the eighth day because the dried umbilical cord only falls on the seventh day, and before that moment the newborn child looks "more like a plant than an animal".⁴²

Little is known about the events taking place on the day itself, apart from sacrifices, lustrations and family gathering. *Cognati* in the female line may have played a special rôle. Persius (*Sat.* 2.31-34) describes an apotropaic gesture made by the *matertera* (maternal aunt): "see how a granny (*auia*), or an auntie (*matertera*) takes baby out of his cradle: skilled in averting the evil eye, she first, with her rebuking middle finger (*infamis digitus*), applies the charm of lustrous spittle to his forehead and slobbering lips". L. et P. Brind'amour related the *matertera's* gesture to a rite of opening of the eyes and hence to the ceremony of the *dies lustricus* where she would have played the rôle of Juno.⁴³ Another underlying rôle may be suggested: the *matertera*, "the other mother" from the maternal side, *quasi mater altera* says Festus, impregnates the child with spittle, a female humour, marking the maternal line in a society which tends to disregard the maternal contribution to the child.⁴⁴ This gesture may be depicted on a miniature onyx alabastron dating to the end of the Republican period (50-30 B.C.), now in Berlin, where three women hold and touch a baby (fig. 7).⁴⁵ E. Zwierlein-Diehl argued that they could represent the Carmentes, Carmentis with Porrima and Postverta,⁴⁶ divine protectresses of a child belonging to the imperial family, possibly Marcellus. One holds a jug which could refer to purification rites on the *dies lustricus*.

Amuletic presents probably completed the social and gendered identity of the child. No text explains when they were offered. Was it on the *dies lustricus* or on a later occasion, or were they given already at birth for protection against evil influences responsible for untimely deaths?⁴⁷ The occasions probably differed according to the type. The golden *bullā* is the best-known amulet with clear gendered and social connotations. Reserved for boys, it was probably given by the father himself, as did Tarquin the Elder according to legend, and hence possibly at

39 G. Delaisi de Parseval and S. Lallemand, *L'art d'accueillir les bébés* (Paris 1980); D. Lett and M.-F. Morel, *Une histoire de l'allaitement* (Paris 2006) especially 66-67.

40 Plut., *Quaest. Rom.* 288B-E; Macrobius, *Sat.* 1.16.36.

41 Arist., *Hist. an.* 588a 8-10.

42 Plut., *Quaest. Rom.* 288C.

43 L. and P. Brind'Amour, "La deuxième satire de Perse et le *dies lustricus*," *Latomus* 30 (1971) 999-1024.

44 Even birthmarks could be attributed to paternal influence: Dasen, "Empreintes" (supra n.10).

45 A. Furtwängler, *Die antiken Gemmen* III (Berlin 1900) 336-39, figs. 183-84; E. Zwierlein-Diehl, *Das Onyx-Alabastron aus Stift Nottuln in Berlin* (Berlin 1999).

46 On Carmentis, Porrima and Postverta, see Ov., *Fast.* 1.631-36. See also Macrobius, *Sat.* 1.7.20 (Antevorta and Postvorta); Zwierlein-Diehl *ibid.* 16-20. Also L. L. Tels-de Jong, *Sur quelques divinités romaines de la naissance et de la prophétie* (Delft 1959).

47 V. Dasen, "Amulettes d'enfants dans le monde grec et romain," *Latomus* 62 (2003) 275-89; ead., "Protéger l'enfant: amulettes et *crepundia*," in Gourevitch, Moirin and Rouquet (supra n.1) 172-77. On the nature of these evil influences at Rome, see, e.g., I. Sorlin, "Striges et geloudes. Histoire d'une croyance et d'une tradition," *Tr&Mém* 11 (1991) 411-36; C. M. McDonough, "Carna, Proca and the Strix on the Kalends of June," *TAPhA* 127 (1997) 315-44.

the *dies lustricus* to mark the child's entry into the paternal line.⁴⁸ As a token of free birth, the *bullae* was proudly exhibited by freedmen's children. *Bullae* are almost never found in a funerary context, perhaps because the amulet was transmitted to another boy if the first died prematurely.⁴⁹ The gendered distribution of the other types of amulets is more difficult to establish. *Lunulae*, moon-crescent shaped pendants, were usually, but not exclusively, given to girls and women, phalluses to boys, little bells or antlers' roundels to both. Part of protection rites, all aimed at promoting a harmonious growth.

We are left with many questions. One uncertainty relates to non-Roman citizens, such as children born in slavery. Was some kind of birth rite performed for them or not? A stela in Köln may provide a hint as to the answer.⁵⁰ It records the death of a boy who lived 9 days.

D M
L(ucius) CASSIVS TACITVS
VERNACLO F(ilio)
VIXIT DIEBVS VIII

To the departed spirits
Lucius Cassius Tacitus
made it for his son Vernaculus
who lived 9 days

Nine days after birth takes place the *dies lustricus* for boys, who then received a name. Is it a coincidence?⁵¹ Is Vernaculus a real name or the diminutive form of *uerna*, denoting a slave born in the house, in that case probably from the master and a slave woman?⁵² Vernaculus followed by *filius* could be the name of a free boy, meaning "born locally".⁵³ Epigraphic commemorations of children who died before the *dies lustricus* are very few, which confirms the social importance of the rite. We may add a Roman inscription for a *puer* who was commemorated with his mother because he had just received a name (*puero nato et nomine inposito*), but ironically the inscription does not give it.⁵⁴

II. Archaeological evidence: birth rites disrupted by death

For the last fifteen years, an increased attention to burials of infants has led to the discovery of numerous graves of fetuses and newborn babies. The striking under-representation of small children in communal funerary spaces is now explained by their presence outside traditional

48 Plut., *Quaest. Rom.* 287F-288B; Plin., *NH* 33.10. On the *bullae*, see R. E. A. Palmer, "Bullae insignia ingenuitatis," *AJAH* 14 (1989) 1-69.

49 In Roman Gaul: M. Feugère, "L'évolution du mobilier non céramique dans les sépultures antiques de Gaule méridionale (IIe siècle av. J.-C.–début du Ve siècle ap. J.-C.)," in M. Struck (ed.), *Römerzeitliche Gräber als Quellen zu Religion, Bevölkerungsstruktur und Sozialgeschichte* (Mainz 1993) 150 (3 gold *bullae*, 1 in bronze); G. Bordenache Battaglia, *Corredi funerari di età imperiale e barbarica nel Museo Nazionale Romano* (Roma 1983) 36, fig. 1.

50 *CIL* XIII.2 8375. Köln, Römisches-Germanisches Museum inv. 415.

51 B. Rawson drew my attention to another possible 9 days' old baby, another possible *vernacula*, at *CIL* VI 10891.

52 For Vernaculus as a name see *CIL* VI 33665 (dedication of Aemilius Saturninus to his *alumnus* called Vernaculus). On *uernae*, see B. Rawson, "Children in the Roman familia," in ead. (ed.), *The family in ancient Rome: new perspectives* (London 1986) especially 186-95; "Degrees of freedom. *Vernae* and Junian Latins in the Roman familia," in V. Dasen and Th. Späth (edd.), *Children, memory, and family identity in Roman culture* (Oxford, forthcoming).

53 In *CIL* VI 14208 a girl, Calpurnia, is called *natione uernacula*, 'born locally'; I owe this reference to B. Rawson.

54 *CIL* VI 20427 (marble plaque). *CIL* X.1 3547 is another commemoration of a very young child (4 days and 10 hours), as is *CIL* VI 16119 (5 days old). See also the baby *ab ubere raptus* (*CIL* VI 23790), but the expression may also denote an older child, as weaning takes place at 2-3 years of age only. On the commemoration of children in epigraphy, see H. S. Nielsen, "Interpreting epithets in Roman epitaphs," in B. Rawson and P. Weaver (edd.), *The Roman family in Italy: status, sentiment, space* (Oxford 1997) 169-204; M. King, "Commemoration of infants on Roman funerary inscriptions," in G. J. Oliver (ed.), *The epigraphy of death. Studies in the history and society of Greece and Rome* (Liverpool 2000) 117-54; J. McWilliam, "Children among the dead. The influence of urban life on the commemoration of children on tombstone inscriptions," in S. Dixon (ed.), *Childhood, class and kin in the Roman world* (London 2001) 74-98. For evidence from Roman Gaul, see also N. Baills, "Stèles épigraphiques dédiées aux enfants en bas âge," in Gourevitch, Moirin and Rouquet (supra n.1) 125-31.

funerary contexts.⁵⁵ Many recent discoveries have been made in Roman Gaul, but similar ones are recorded in other parts of the empire.⁵⁶

I will consider a selection of examples from different settlements, aware that mourning practices may vary in time and place and also reflect local traditions.⁵⁷ Common patterns, however, appear. Infants up to 6 months of age (a precise age is not always determined) have been uncovered either in domestic contexts within the dwelling or outside it, along the walls, as in the *villa rustica* at Langeais (France), excavated in 2000.⁵⁸ Eighteen newborn babies were discovered (12 inside the house, 6 outside along the wall), all perinatal, about 1 month old. At Pourliat near Clermont-Ferrand a space outside the enclosure of a *villa rustica* revealed 27 babies in pots or plain earth, none older than 6 months and the youngest a viable fetus about 7 lunar months old.⁵⁹ Infants have also been found beneath the floor of workshops, as in the pottery building of Sallèles d'Aude, where 12 graves were arranged along the walls (7 were newborn babies of about 10 lunar months, 4 were children of 1-3 months, and the oldest was of 6-9 months).⁶⁰

Discoveries on rural settlements in Britain, were first interpreted as traces of infanticide, especially when the burials were grouped in the farmyard. At Hambledon (Bucks.), 97 babies, mostly newly born, were uncovered in agricultural processing installations, and 47 babies were found at Barton Court Farm (Oxon).⁶¹ A conjunction of elements is necessary to identify archae-

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- 55 E. Scott, *The archaeology of infancy and infant death* (Oxford 1999), opened the discussion. For a detailed review of recent discoveries, see F. Blaizot, G. Alix and E. Ferber, "Le traitement funéraire des enfants décédés avant un an dans l'Antiquité: études de cas," *Bull. Mém. Soc. d'Anthropologie de Paris* 15 (2003) <<http://bmsap.revues.org/document560.html>>; B. Dedet, *Les enfants dans la société protohistorique. L'exemple du Sud de la France* (Rome 2008), offers an important study of over 400 burials of children, including fetuses and neonates (8th-1st c. B.C.).
- 56 A database of similar finds in Greece is being assembled under the direction of A.-M. Guimier-Sorbets, A. Hermary and Y. Morizot (ANR project *L'enfant et la mort*, Université Paris X and Centre Camille Jullian, Aix-en-Provence); see, e.g., A. Ingvarsson-Sundström, *Children lost and found. A bioarchaeological study of Middle Helladic children in Asine with a comparison to Lerna* (Uppsala 2003); A. Lagia, "Notions of childhood in the classical polis: evidence from the bioarchaeological records," in Cohen and Rutter (supra n.1) 293-306. Most impressive is the recent find of over 2300 babies in pots (*enchytrismoï*) on the island of Astypalaia in the Dodecanese: S. Hillson, "Investigating ancient cemeteries on the island of Astypalaia, Greece," *Archaeology International* 5 (2002) 29-31.
- 57 For other contexts see, e.g., F. Laubenheimer, "La mort des tout petits dans l'Occident romain," in Dasen, *Naissance* (supra n.1) 293-315; N. Baills-Talbis and Ph. Blanchard, "Sépultures de nouveau-nés et de nourrissons du 1er âge de Fer au Haut Moyen Âge. Découvertes hors des contextes funéraires traditionnels sur les territoires carnute, turon et bituriges cube: inventaire, synthèse et interprétations," *RACentre Suppl.* 29 (2006) 157-205.
- 58 T. Guiot, F. Couvin and Ph. Blanchard, "Le site antique (Ier-IIIe s.) des Béziaux à Langeais (Indre-et-Loire)," *RACentre* 42 (2003) 75-119.
- 59 G. Alfonso and F. Blaizot, *La villa gallo-romaine de Champ Madame à Beaumont (Puy-de-Dôme): habitat et ensemble funéraire de nourrissons* (Lyon 2004).
- 60 For similar discoveries in potters' workshops, see H. Vertet, "Observations sur la sociologie et l'économie des ateliers de potiers gallo-romains du centre de la Gaule," in L. Rivet (ed.), *Actes du congrès de Cognac, 1991. Société Française d'Étude de la Céramique Antique en Gaule* (Marseille 1991) 185-91; Ch. Pellecuer, "La villa des Prés-Bas (Loupian, Hérault): domaine et production agricole dans le territoire de la cité antique de Béziers," in M. Clavel-Lévêque and R. Planat-Mallart (edd.), *Cité et territoire. Colloque européen, Béziers 1994* (Paris 1995) 187-93.
- 61 See Scott (supra n.49) 110-20, and in general S. May, "Infanticide in Roman Britain," *Antiquity* 257 (1993) 883-88; id., "Killing the unwanted child," *British Archaeology* 2 (March 1995) 8-9. See also the infants' burials in the rural settlement of Owslebury: J. Collis, "Owslebury (Hants) and the problem of burials on rural settlements," in R. Reece (ed.), *Burial in the Roman world* (CBA Res. Rep. 22, 1987) 26-35. In Spain, the hypothesis of human sacrifice prevails: see, e.g., C. Belarte and J. Sanmarti, "Espais de culte i pràctiques rituals a la catalunya protohistòrica," in *Quaderns de prehistòria i arqueologia de Castelló* 18: *Espacios y lugares culturales en el mundo ibérico* (1997) especially 14-15. For a detailed discussion and bibliography, see N. Baills-Talbi and V. Dasen, "Rites funéraires et pratiques

ological evidence of infanticide. At Ashkelon, a hundred newborn babies were discarded in the sewer of a Roman bathhouse, which may have served as a brothel: the unwanted children seem to have been predominantly male.⁶²

New explanations are now offered for the regular presence of neonates in settlements. The findings are reminiscent of the practice mentioned by Fulgentius in the 5th c., when he observes that children less than 40 days old were buried "under the eaves" of the houses.⁶³

Funerary practices confirm the liminal status of babies who received distinct funerary treatments because of their age. The first practice is inhumation, in a vessel (broken or not) in plain earth covered with a tile, which is common to the whole group of children under 6 months.⁶⁴ Ancient authors also allude to it, such as the Elder Pliny (*NH* 7.72) explaining that children who have not yet teethed are not cremated. It seems possible to relate the child's degree of social integration into the community to an increasing diversity of material, as the site of Sal-lèles d'Aude shows.⁶⁵ The newborns were buried in a contracted position, indicating that they had not survived long enough to be swaddled, with no grave goods: a tile, sometimes fragmentary, served to mark the grave rather than actually to protect it. Infants up to 3 months were found in less contracted positions, in a bigger shaft, covered by a larger tile. One of the children had a *fibula*, perhaps attached to the swaddling by the mother. The oldest child, 6-9 months old, had a more elaborate, brick-lined, grave, covered with two *tegulae* and a set of objects: a perfume bottle, a lamp, and a small cup which may have contained food.

This pattern is found in several places. After 6 months, which corresponds to the teething period and to the introduction of solid food, child burials tend to have the same equipment as adults, but with the specifics, such as amulets and miniature objects, adapted to their size.⁶⁶ B. Dedet made similar observations in the protohistoric south of France. His study, based on over 140 burials of neonates from different sites, shows that newborn babies were inhumed in settlements, in or near the house, in a contracted position, not yet swaddled, with no grave goods.⁶⁷ Funerary offerings usually accompany children only when they attain about 6 months. He notes that objects often relate to the female sphere (*fibulae*, beads and bracelets) and argues convincingly that they do not indicate the sex of the child, but reflect female care of the baby.⁶⁸

The placement of burials outside traditional funerary contexts implies that socialisation has not yet taken place. Funerary practices are reduced to the minimum, but do exist. The absence of funerary offerings along with fetuses or newborn babies is not systematic. Some burials show care for the afterlife of the newly born. Two graves dating to the 1st c. A.D. found in cemeteries in Aventicum in 2002 revealed a newborn baby (10 lunar months) with a coin, and a

magiques," in F. Gusi, S. Muriel and C. Olària (edd.), *Nasciturus, infans, puerulus, vobis mater terra. La muerte en la infancia. La mort dans l'enfance* (Castelló de la Plana 2008) 595-618.

62 P. Smith and G. Kahila, "Identification of infanticide in archaeological sites: a case study from the Late Roman-Early Byzantine periods at Ashkelon, Israel," *JArchSci* 19 (1992) 667-75; M. Faerman and G. Kahila Bar-Gal, "Determining the sex of infanticide victims from the Late Roman era through ancient DNA analysis," *JArchSci* 25 (1998) 861-65. Sex determination, however, is not complete nor certain: see T. Waldron, G. M. Taylor and D. Rudling, "Sexing of Romano-British baby burials from the Beddingham and Bignor villas," *Sussex Arch. Coll.* 137 (1999) 71-79, who measured the depth of the sciatic notch in fetal ilia and identified as many male as female babies.

63 *Expositio sermonum antiquorum* 7 (*Quid sint suggrundaria*). Cf. Verg., *Aen.* 6.426-29, a description of babies placed together at the entry to the Underworld. Could it suggest that Roman belief had the idea that babies are happier when buried together? I owe this idea to A. E. Hanson.

64 See, e.g., Blaizot, Alix and Ferber (supra n.55); Guiot, Couvin and Blanchard (supra n.58); Alfonso and Blaizot (supra n.59). Medical writers often compare the uterus to a vessel (*angos* in Greek); is the placing of the child in a jar intended symbolically to re-create a uterine environment?

65 H. Duday, F. Laubenheimer and A.-M. Tillier, *Sallèles d'Aude. Nouveau-nés et nourrissons gallo-romains* (Paris 1995).

66 See N. Rouquet, "Les dépôts funéraires dans les tombes d'enfants à Bourges (Cher)," in Gourevitch, Moirin and Rouquet (supra n.1) 123-24.

67 Dedet (supra n.55) 119-38.

68 *Ibid.* 138-56 and 371-81.

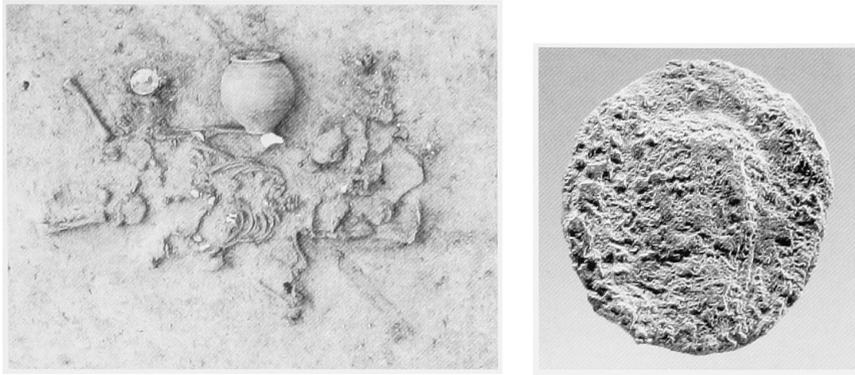


Fig. 8a. Neonate (10 lunar months) with funerary coin, from Aventicum, Sur Fourches St. 29, coin inv. 00/12691-1 (© Avenches, Musée romain).

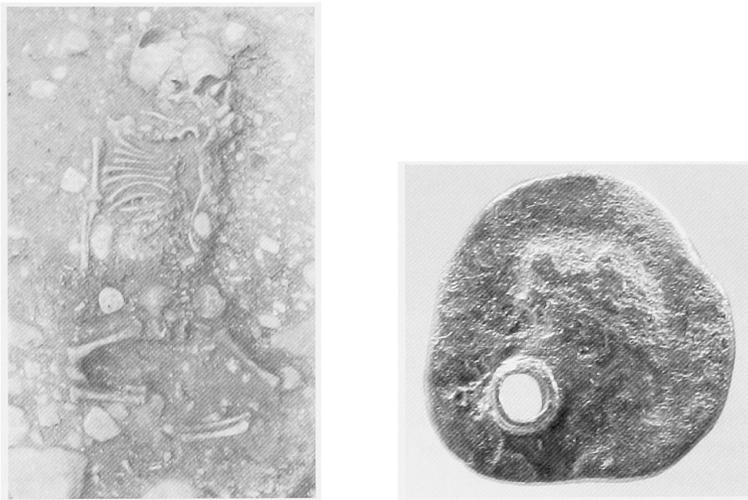


Fig. 8b. Neonate (1 month) with funerary coin, from Aventicum, A la Montagne St 125, pierced coin inv. 01-02/11322-1 (© Avenches, Musée romain).

one-month baby with a pierced coin as a pendant (figs. 8a-b).⁶⁹ These babies were just born, but they were safeguarded by mortuary rites, though they may not yet have had a name.

Another example shows that even babies who were never born could receive a decent burial. At Poundbury (Dorset), the 4th-c. cemetery yielded a coffin with the remains of a child cut into pieces who had clearly been extracted by embryotomy because it was very big and could not be delivered. Though it never cried and hence was never "born", the baby was decently buried in a coffin, alone, which implies that the mother survived.⁷⁰

Burial practices thus suggest that infants had a liminal status allowing them to stay within or near settlements. Though not yet fully social beings, they did not need to be separated from the domestic space; until teething and change of regimen, their milk-fed bodies did not pollute the house. This practice demonstrates that in principle babies were no threat to the living, as is commonly asserted. No specific trace of fear from these premature deaths has been found.⁷¹

69 Chr. Kramar, in collaboration with P. Blanc, "Etude paléanthropologique et paléopathologique des sujets inhumés à Avenches dans les nécropoles d'A la Montagne et de la porte de l'Ouest/Sur Fourches," *Bull. Assoc. Pro Aventico* 47 (2005) 7-61, especially figs. 5 and 9.

70 D. Gourevitch, "Chirurgie obstétricale dans le monde romain: césarienne et embryotomie," in Dasen, *Naissance* (supra n.1) especially 262-63.

71 A lead *defixio* was found in the tomb of a young child at Hadrumetum: A. Audollent, *Defixionum tabellae* (Paris 1904) no. 298. Another example comes from Athens: B. Schlörb-Vierneisel, "Eridanos-Nekropole.

Burial practices also show that this liminal status extended well beyond naming rites, as some of the infants found were at least 6 months old.⁷²

III. Roman birth rites of passage a century after van Gennep

How can we now understand birth rites of passage in light of new anthropological, iconographical and archaeological elements which focus on different moments?

The notion of a three-phase structure (separation, margin, aggregation) is still valid, but Roman birth rites appear to be a much more complex process than commonly assumed, with overlapping phases and much flexibility in the construction of neonatal status — a flexibility also present in other stages of development, such as in puberty rites.

Birth is the first determining moment when fate is fixed, and the stage from birth to the *dies lustricus* is a busy period during which a human identity is constructed for the child. The baby and its family are not simply waiting for its human identity to come into existence after a requisite amount of time. Rather, the neonate follows a separation process which does not end with the first bath. The baby continues for days with a specific diet, swaddling, and massages which aim at eliminating traces of uterine life that cling to the child, remnants characteristic of a shapeless and viscous period of development.⁷³

The *dies lustricus* remains the neonate's first major step in public affairs, but it is not the equivalent of a Christian baptism. Children dead before the naming day were not impure and did not transform into malevolent ghosts.⁷⁴ The *dies lustricus* marked the beginning of the long phase of social aggregation that started with swaddling and massages. "Becoming human" and becoming a full individual was a long process with many steps, marked by physiological changes such as teething, which influenced funerary rites.⁷⁵ The child was for a long time not considered entirely formed physically, emotionally or mentally. Archaeology confirms the length of the process: the death of a baby up to at least 6 months old remained an essentially private and domestic event. Authors such as Cicero or Plutarch recommend to avoid public mourning of children who have died and castigate the display of personal grief.⁷⁶ What could be more restrained than burying the newborn in or near the house, without leaving the domestic space? Funerary practices also show that babies' special status did not imply indifference on the part of the parents.

Recent archaeological finds also confirm that newborns could already exist as individuals. The newly-born had a legal existence, as long as they were born alive and had cried.⁷⁷ The

Berichte über die Grabungen 1964 und 1965 südlich der heiligen Strasse," *AthMitt* 81 (1966) 54, no 106, pl. 42.5. See the discussion in Baills-Talbi and Dasen (supra n.61).

72 Dedet (supra n.55) 155-56 makes similar observations for the south of France.

73 Cf. the interpretation by Köves-Zulauf (supra n.7) 95-219 of the nocturnal ritual of three men (Varro *ap. August.*, *De civ. D.* 6.9), alluding to the first care of the child: severing the umbilical cord (Intercidona and his axe), testing physical soundness (Pilumnus and his pestle), giving the first bath (Deverra and his brooms).

74 Cf., e.g., McWilliam (supra n.54) 78: "until children were named on the *dies lustricus* (...), they were considered impure and not members of the household, even if the *paterfamilias* had raised them up (*tollere*) after birth". Burial by torchlight, however, did not aim at dispelling pollution; torches are part of another symbolic process demonstrated by J. Scheid, "*Contraria facere*: renversements et déplacements dans les rites funéraires," *Aion* 6 (1984) 117-39.

75 On dentition as an indicator of the child's development, see the Hippocratic treatises on teething (*De Dentitione*) and on fleshes (*De Carnibus*). On teething, see also A. E. Hanson, "' Your mother nursed you with bile': anger in babies and small children," in S. Braund and G. W. Most (edd.), *Ancient anger. Perspectives from Homer to Galen* (Cambridge 2003) especially 200-2.

76 Cic., *Tusc.* 1.39. See also Plut., *Numa* 12.3, for the legal regulations attributed to Numa. For a review of these rules, see, e.g., McWilliam (supra n.54). On the contrasting private (feminine) and public (male) mourning practices, see F. Prescendi, "Il lutto dei padri nella cultura romana," in F. Hinard (ed.), *La mort au quotidien dans le monde romain* (Paris 1995) 147-54.

77 Gell., *NA* 3.16.21, mentions an inquiry about an 8-month-old child who died soon after birth (*statim mortuus*). As it was born alive, it should satisfy the conditions of the *ius trium liberorum*.



Fig. 9. Relief from Les Bolards, Nuits-Saint-Georges. Dijon, Musée archéologique (© Th. Blais-MAD).

patria potestas was created by the birth itself, whether the father was present or not at the time of delivery. The rights of the child as potential heir existed even before birth, and the inheritance rights of the fetus were duly protected.⁷⁸

The baby had a preliminary social existence too. A birth was announced to the neighbourhood by placing a laurel wreath on the front door and inscribing the news on the wall of the house.⁷⁹ Friends came to the house to congratulate the father and benches were set up in the streets along the house, thus incorporating passers-by into the festivities.⁸⁰

Newborns also had a religious existence. In addition to the Parcae or Moirai, an array of familiar deities protected the newborn: Vaticanus, patron of the first cry, Levana, another doublet of the midwife, and Cunina, who watched over the cradle.⁸¹ Altars and special places were prepared in the home for these divine presences, such as a *lectisternium* for Picumnus and Pilumnus or Juno and Hercules in the atrium.⁸²

Even before birth the child could be the object of rites anticipating his status as a separate being. Evidence of pre-birth rites are found in fetus protection spells and lot-oracles, and in a number of amulets, such as the magical gem in the Taubman collection depicting the fetus in the

78 E.g., *Dig.* 28.2.4 (Ulpian). The child *in utero* also had *postliminium* rights: M. Hirt, "La législation romaine et les droits de l'enfant," in *Dasen, Naissance* (supra n.1) 281-91.

79 A series of inscriptions found at Pompeii announce a birth: see, e.g., *CIL* IV 3819 (*Natus est Cornelius Sabinus*) and *CIL* IV 294 and 3890; J. Képartová, "Kinder in Pompeji. Eine epigraphische Untersuchung," *Klio* 66 (1984) 192-209.

80 *Stat., Silv.* 4.8.37-40; *Juv.* 6.78-80 and 85 (on benches and laurel wreath); *Gell., NA* 12.1. On the organization of a "street-party" mixing private and public, see *Rawson* (supra n.4) 109.

81 *Gell., NA* 16.17; *Varro ap. August., De civ. D.* 4.11. On these deities, see G. Binder, *s.v.* Geburt in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* IX (1976) especially 102-15.

82 *Varro ap. Servius, ad Aen.* 10.76 (Picumnus and Pilumnus); *Servius, ad Ecl.* 4.62 (Juno and Hercules).

form of Harpocrates, fully formed, seated on the uterus, and controlling the time of its birth.⁸³ A desired but miscarried or still-born child could be grieved and receive a simple but distinct burial.⁸⁴

Iconographic sources also reveal the importance of the too often overlooked figure of the midwife, who presides over the entry of the child into life, and who merges with the divine image of the Parcae or Moirai on gems.⁸⁵ Gallo-Roman statuary groups of the so-called *Matres* show that this assimilation was not limited to Italy. Unlike the Italian Parcae-Moirai, the Gallo-Roman *Matres* often hold a child. The stone reliefs traditionally depict three seated women with objects evoking the first bath as well as attributes of the Parcae-Moirai.⁸⁶ On the monument from Vertault (Châtillon sur Seine), the first woman holds the swaddled baby, the second a towel (or is it a *volumen*?), the third a basin (or is it a *patera*?) and a very distinct sponge.⁸⁷ The reference to the Parcae-Moirai may be more explicit. On the monument from Les Bolards (fig. 9), one holds a swaddled baby and a balance, the second a *volumen*, two attributes alluding to the future, while the third has a *patera*, which, like *cornucopiae*, predicts prosperity.⁸⁸

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- 83 V. Dasen, "Représenter l'invisible: la vie utérine sur les gemmes magiques," in ead. (ed.), *L'embryon humain à travers l'histoire. Images, savoirs et rites* (Gollion 2007) 41-64.
- 84 For sources relating to the "preaccepted" status of fetuses, see D. Frankfurter, "Fetus magic and sorcery fears in Roman Egypt," *GRBS* 46 (2006) especially 47-50.
- 85 Cf. the German name (*die Hebamme*), as well as the Italian one (*levatrice*) for the midwife, alluding to the picking up of the child.
- 86 G. Bauchhenss, s.v. "Matres, matronae," *LIMC* VII (1997) 808-16, esp. nos. 37-38, 41, 43-44; Dasen, "Moirai" (supra n.16), 338-39, add.7. See also the inscription MOIRAI above three seated women holding *paterae* on a votive relief in Bucharest, Nat. Mus. 18748; de Angeli (supra n.27) no. 3.
- 87 Bauchhenss *ibid.* no 38; S. Deyts, *Images des dieux de la Gaule* (Paris 1992) especially 64-66 (with fig.); ead. in Dasen, *Naissance* (supra n.1) 227-28.
- 88 On the possible identification of a Moira in Byzantine iconography, see I. Jevtić, "L'inscription dans la vie: la fileuse dans la Nativité de la Vierge," *Zbornik Radova Vizantoloskog Instituta* 42 (2009) forthcoming.