

Infant death and burial in Roman Italy

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Introduction

In Virgil's *Aeneid* (6.426-29), Aeneas travels to the Underworld where he hears voices, sobs and 'a loud crying of voices ... , the spirits of weeping infants'. These babies had been stolen by fate 'at the first threshold of this sweet life ... torn from the breast, and drowned in bitter death'. Nearby were people who had died on false charges and those who had taken their own lives. In this group of unjustly treated and miserable souls, newborn children appear most pitiable because they had only just begun their lives, and were now doomed to a marginal existence at the gates of Hades. The marginal and ambiguous position of very young children in Roman society is also a feature of Plutarch's *Letter of Consolation to his Wife* 4 and 11, on the death of their two-year-old daughter.¹ He stresses the importance of restraint in mourning, for infants 'have no part in earth or earthly things' and do not require any of the rites normally performed for the dead.

Literary sources such as these have often influenced our understanding of the rôle and place of newborn children and infants in Roman society, particularly in Italy. Such children have been seen as 'marginal', occupying a place at the 'edge' of the household.² When their babies died, parents in Italy are said to have exhibited an "indifference to burying children, especially infants, carefully".³ These influential Roman texts, however, were penned by men whose Stoic world-views typified an aristocratic world of restraint and self-control. Their writings can hardly be considered a reflection of what the general population, both men and women, thought and felt when their children died. Furthermore, there has never been a study of the archaeological evidence in Italian cemeteries for the burial of the youngest children, from prematurely born babies to infants just months old.⁴ As recently as 2003, B. Rawson could write that excavations in Italian cemeteries have not provided useful or accessible material for an investigation of child burials.⁵ Claims of outright neglect or lack of care in burying infants in Roman Italy are thus without an evidential basis.

The importance of such remains for understanding attitudes towards infancy is obvious. Equally, it is critical to study all children in skeletal assemblages to reconstruct population size and mortality, fertility and birth rates in Roman society in this region.⁶ In light of the apparent invisibility of the youngest children in Italian cemeteries and the unreliability of contemporary written comments on social attitudes and decorum, my study focuses primarily on the mortuary evidence for children under the age of one year in Italy from

1 For a discussion of this document in the context of the genre of consolation, see Baltussen 2009.

2 Wiedemann 1989, 179.

3 Russell 1985, 49. He also posits an "indifference to infanticide morally". See also Sallares *et al.* 2004, 319: "Infants rarely received proper burial in Roman times".

4 In France, Germany and Switzerland, on the other hand, more has been done on the topic of infant death and burial in the Roman period: cf. Mackensen 1978; Berger 1993; Blaizot *et al.* 2003; Laubenheimer 2004; Gourevitch *et al.* 2004; Coulon 2004; Durand 2008; Baills-Talbia and Dasen 2008. For infant burials in N Africa, see Norman 2002 and 2003.

5 Rawson 2003, 341. Hänninen (2005, 54) reiterates this: "Very few graves for babies under one year old are known in Italy".

6 Baker *et al.* 2005, 3-5.