

Did Ancient Romans Love Their Children?

Infanticide in Ancient Rome

By

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Abandoned babies are not the thing of the past, it still happens today. Every couple of months one can turn on the news, open the newspaper, or get online and find that someone else has left an infant in a restroom, or by the side of the road, or on someone's doorstep. Despite the Safe Haven laws in most states new mothers still leave their children in public restrooms to be found by a stranger, or left to die. Leaving infants somewhere they can be found is something that started thousands of years ago. This paper will focus on infants that were abandoned in the first centuries B.C. and A.D. in ancient Rome with a practice known as infanticide, also called exposure. It occurred often in the ancient world and there were many reasons why it happened. Parents endangered their children in this way because they loved their children, the ones they raised as well as the ones they exposed.

John Eastburn Boswell's article, "*Expositio* and *Oblatio*: The Abandonment of Children and the Ancient and Medieval Family," gives a good definition of abandonment, as the "voluntary and permanent relinquishing of control over children by natal parents or guardians, whether by leaving them somewhere, selling them, or legally consigning care and control to some other person."¹ The term *expositio* is a Latin term used in connection with infanticide often meaning "exposure" but Boswell says that it does not mean "exposure;" the Latin term is closer to the English word "exposition," in other words meaning "to put out" or an "offering" up of the child. While *expositio* was not without any risk, the point was not to put the child in danger but to offer the child to "the kindness of strangers, to the mercy of the gods, to public welfare, to a better fate (than the natal

¹ John Eastburn Boswell, "Expositio and Oblatio: The Abandonment of Children and the Ancient and Medieval Family," *American Historical Review* 89 (1984): 12.

parents could offer), or simply to his chances.”² The whole point of *expositio* was to give the child to the world, the Gods, and remove the child from the responsibility of the family; if the child died as a result, it was not killed by the family. *Expositio* was the alternative to infanticide in many people’s minds. The hope was that the child would be picked up and reared by another family or person, but the child could die. Boswell points out a child that is picked up and reared as a slave or a son was certainly not the victim of infanticide.³

While many moralists were opposed to the practice they were often very clear about the fact that *expositio* was morally the same as infanticide. Infanticide was the deliberate killing of an infant as opposed to the offering up of an infant to its fate, but if they are looked at as distinctly their own ideas their differences can be seen.⁴ Lactantius, a Christian writer from the late third century, early fourth century, makes the comment about people “who either strangle their own children or, if they are too pious for that, expose them.”⁵ This shows that in his mind there is a difference between the parents that outright kill their children and the good Christian parents who just expose them and leave them to their fate. However, Lactantius is still worried about the children that are found. He worries that people cannot be thought of as innocent if they are offering up their own flesh and blood as a casualty of the wild dogs and that if the infants are picked up and reared they will be brought up in brothels or slavery.⁶ There was an overpowering expectation that the child would be picked up by a stranger whether they wanted the child

² Boswell, 13.

³ Boswell, 13.

⁴ Boswell, 13.

⁵ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, trans. Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), V.15.

⁶ Lactantius, VI. 27.

for good (to raise as their own), or bad (for slavery or prostitution). Justin Martyr, an apologist from the second century A.D., says that “we have been taught that it is wicked to expose even newly-born children, first, because we see that almost all those who are exposed (not only girls, but boys) are raised in prostitution.”⁷ Boswell says that even the ancient writers that were trying to convince parents of the dangers of exposure quite often predicted in their arguments of the unhappy outcomes of the infants who were rescued by strangers and that death was only one possibility, which was not affected by the parents.⁸ W.V. Harris wants to make sure that there is a distinction being made between Exposure A and Exposure B. Exposure A is where the exposer would have hoped, whether realistically or not, that the child would be rescued, and Exposure B where the exposer hoped for the death of the infant.⁹

The existence of infanticide has been disputed by some scholars. One scholar does not think that female infanticide could have happened in the ancient world at all. Donald Engels’ article “The Problem of Female Infanticide in the Graeco-Roman World” gives his reasons for why it could not happen. His argument is based around demographic evidence, although he does say that one should not base their argument around the skeletal remains because the smaller a bone is the less likely it is to survive and the male-female ratio would be skewed just looking at them.¹⁰ He also says that death rates should not be determined using the ages left on tombstones because they depict a “massive

⁷ Saint Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, ed. Thomas B. Falls (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1977), 27.

⁸ Boswell, 14.

⁹ W. V. Harris, “Child-Exposure in the Roman Empire,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 84 (1994): 9

¹⁰ Donald Engels, “The Problem of Female Infanticide in the Graeco-Roman World,” *Classical Philology* 75 (1980): 112.

mortality rate among adolescents and young adults with few dying in old age,”¹¹ and that the sex ratio cannot be counted using art and literature because most of the art and literature are focused around political, military, or economic topics, mainly male centered themes.¹² He bases his whole argument around demographic numbers from “a few, demographic principles concerning ancient human populations, and these show a high rate of female infanticide was impossible.”¹³

Engels first principle is that the sex ratio of newborn infants was about one female for every 1.05 males in all societies with recorded evidence so it was doubtlessly the same in antiquity. Next he says that the natural increase of a population is based on the difference between its birth rate and its death rate.¹⁴ The natural increase rate for any ancient population was small or nonexistent, according to Engels, since he is comparing the ancient population to the population growth that occurred in the eighteenth century. The alternate way of determining an ancient population growth rate would be to see what the consequences of a growth rate would be. Engels uses a population growth rate that is nearly equal in his calculations.¹⁵ His last principle is that the average life expectancy in antiquity was quite low, less than thirty years but more than twenty.¹⁶ When the life expectancy is low for a society it means that a small proportion of women are living to the average age of reproduction. From these numbers Engels is able to calculate that the

¹¹ Engels, 113.

¹² Engels, 114.

¹³ Engels, 114.

¹⁴ Engels, 114-115.

¹⁵ Engels, 115-116.

¹⁶ Engels, 116.

birth and death rate would be between 34 and 50 per 1,000 per year with an average of about 40 per 1,000 per year of the birth and death rate.¹⁷

At this point Engels adds in the consequences of a high rate of female infanticide. He uses the example that if one-fifth of all females born a year were killed it would have two effects on a population. The first effect would be immediate and that is that it would increase the population's death rate. It would change the death rate to about 44 per 1,000 per year. The second effect would take place about forty-five to forty-nine years later when the first generation of girls whose numbers were reduced by infanticide reached the age of menopause. There would only be four-fifths as many women as before and it would have reduced the number of children being born in the next generation by one-fifth. This would reduce the birth rate to only 32 per 1,000 per year and raise the death rate to 44 per 1,000 per year. This would then give a negative rate of natural increase of 12 per 1,000 per year, this would reduce the population by half in only 57.75 years, and by three-quarters in 115.5 years and finally down to seven-eighths in only 173.25 years.¹⁸ Engels thinks that even if they were able to get their birth rate back up to somewhere between 40 and 50 per 1,000 per year the "demographic consequences of a high rate of female infanticide would still be catastrophic."¹⁹ He concludes by saying that even a rate of ten percent of females killed a year would still be highly unlikely and it never would have exceeded more than just a few percent of female births in any era.²⁰

While Engels may sound convincing, most scholars are not convinced, including myself. William H. Harris' "The Theoretical Possibility of Extensive Infanticide in the

¹⁷ Engels, 118.

¹⁸ Engels, 118-119.

¹⁹ Engels, 119.

²⁰ Engels, 120.

Graeco-Roman World” is an article that counters Engels. He starts off by saying that there are “extremely strong reasons for supposing that the exposure of infants, very often resulting in death, was common in many different parts of the Roman Empire, and that it had considerable demographic, economic, and psychological effects.”²¹ Harris admits that Engels has read the demographic studies unlike other authors who have argued Engels’ point before. Unlike those other authors, Engels has completely ignored any ancient texts that mention child exposure and completely relies on demographic evidence. This is not a good idea in that the demographic evidence is in fact misleading.²² Mark Golden uses demography in his article “The Exposure of Girls at Athens” to disprove Engels as well, and he says that authors need to be careful when applying demographic principles. Golden says that no matter how useful they may be in general for specific social problems in history, cultural variables need to be taken into account when looking at the numbers.²³ Engels does not seem to be doing this. He just seems to assume that everything is going to be similar across the board no matter who or what culture he is looking at. Harris says that Engels’ main mistake is that he assumes that the Roman world could not have sustained a high rate of natural increase in a large area for a long period of time. He also visualizes a society with a roughly stable population where the birth and death rates are equal and then he adds in a twenty percent female infanticide on top of it and that is what gives him his abrupt results.²⁴ One of these abrupt results is that

²¹ William V. Harris, “The Theoretical Possibility of Extensive Infanticide in the Graeco-Roman World,” *The Classical Quarterly* 32 (1982): 114-116.

²² Harris, “Infanticide,” 114.

²³ Mark Golden, “Demography and the Exposure of Girls at Athens,” *Phoenix* 35 (1981): 320.

²⁴ Harris, “Infanticide,” 114.

a population would decline catastrophically without a substantial arrival of immigrants.²⁵ However, Golden does not agree that Engels has proven that female infanticide could not have occurred in any populations like ancient Rome or Athens. Golden says “A study of ethnological reports on 393 widely scattered cultures shows that 179 commonly and 29 occasionally practised [sic] infanticide, predominantly of girls.”²⁶ He points to a few more studies that also show that female infanticide were very common by people of every level of cultural complexity. It is more the rule than the exception.²⁷

Engels also does not seem to think that the ancient society would be able to stop itself from a severe population decrease without giving up infanticide.²⁸ Harris, however, says that it is very likely that child exposure gained acceptance and people probably were more likely to accept it at times when they felt that there were too many children being born or that there were too many children of one sex being born at any one time. Engels seems to be assuming that infanticide is what would determine such a switch change in population and infanticide is in fact only one small factor that determines it.²⁹ Some of the other factors that determine the fertility of a society “include the age at which its female members begin to practise [sic] coitus, coital frequency, fecundity, the extent of use of effective contraception, and foetal [sic] mortality from voluntary and involuntary causes.”³⁰ Engels also seems to believe that all populations want to grow as rapidly and as large as they possibly can and he does not pay much “attention to ‘preventive checks’ on population growth, social and cultural measures such as abortion, contraception,

²⁵ Golden, “Demography,” 317-318.

²⁶ Golden, “Demography,” 318.

²⁷ Golden, “Demography,” 319.

²⁸ Golden, “Demography,” 319.

²⁹ Harris, “Infanticide,” 115.

³⁰ Harris, “Infanticide,” 115.

segregation of women after child-birth, prolonged breast-feeding, polyandry, polygamy and concubinage, postponed marriage – and infanticide.”³¹ Harris’ last point is that the demographers and anthropologists that Engels is getting his information from do not help his argument at all. All of the anthropologists he used are full of information about societies that have practiced heavy infanticide and commonly kill more females than they do males. Therefore, there is no theoretical reason why female infanticide could not have occurred in the Graeco-Roman world according to Harris.³² According to Golden, Engels main mistake is to assume what he was trying to prove, that the low rate of increase in an ancient population was at least partly a result of conscious efforts in population control, which included infanticide.³³ The stability of the birth and death rates is partially a product of infanticide while Engels thinks that it is the other way around, infanticide would upset the stability of the birth and death rates.³⁴

Harris, Boswell and Golden have shown that infanticide did occur. There were many reasons why it would have occurred that need to be discussed.

Extreme social embarrassment, or disapproval, is the first reason for abandoning infants. Newborn infants may have been abandoned because they were the product “of complicated, irregular, or awkward parentage: stepchildren, illegitimate children, children of marriages opposed or annulled by parents, children of quarreling or jealous parents, or the offspring of incestuous unions.”³⁵ Incest may have been much more common than

³¹ Golden, “Demography,” 319-320.

³² Harris, “Infanticide,” 115-116.

³³ Golden, “Demography,” 320.

³⁴ Golden, “Demography,” 320.

³⁵ Boswell, 19.

people believe so *expositio* would have been the more obvious choice, besides abortion or straight out infanticide, to get rid of the infants resulting from such unions.³⁶

Harris points out that in New Comedy plays, babies that were born to unwed mothers were exposed; it was used as a plot mechanism. Infants in real life were exposed as well. Although Harris is not clear on how much of a general practice it really was to expose illegitimate infants. The early age of marriage and the practice of remarriage in Roman society makes it very unlikely that there were many infants born that were illegitimate.³⁷

Evil omens or despair could sometimes lead to the exposure of an infant as well. In the year A.D. 19 Germanicus, a member of the Imperial family, died. The historian Suetonius says that many parents “refused to acknowledge their newly born children.”³⁸ This probably was meant to mean that children who were born on the day that Germanicus died were thought of as having been tainted by an evil omen.³⁹ Harris offers another suggestion of the situation that some Roman’s recognition of their own feelings for a well loved ruler. It would have been a sign of a good emperor that parents would want to raise their children under him, and a sign of a bad emperor when parents did not want to raise their children under him.⁴⁰ Other reasons Harris gives for this category are slave mothers not wanting to bring up their children in slavery. Mothers would not want to subject their children to the life that they themselves are forced to live. Another

³⁶ Boswell, 19.

³⁷ Harris, “Child-Exposure,” 12-13.

³⁸ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1979), IV.5.

³⁹ Harris, “Child-Exposure,” 14.

⁴⁰ Harris, “Child-Exposure,” 14.

example is of a mother who is divorced while pregnant; she may want to expose her new infant when it is born.⁴¹

Deformities or physical inadequacies were another reason for exposing an infant. To do this an investigation had to be done to see if the problems were sufficient enough to abandon a newborn. The old Roman laws of the Twelve Tables say that a child must be “quickly killed, as the *Twelve Tables* ordain that a dreadfully deformed child shall be killed.”⁴² The Younger Seneca implies that the usual way to kill these children was to drown them.⁴³ Another author from the early imperial time of Rome, Philo, gives a description of the many ways infants may have been killed. He says

Some of them do the deed with their own hands; with monstrous cruelty and barbarity they stifle and throttle the first breath with the infants draw, or throw them into a river or into the depths of the sea, after attaching some heavy substance to make them sink more quickly under its weight. Others take them to be exposed in some desert place, hoping, they themselves say, that they may be saved, but leaving them in actual truth to suffer the most distressing fate. For all the beasts that feed on human flesh visit the spot and feast unhindered on the infants, a fine banquet provided by their sole guardians, those who above all others should keep them safe, their fathers and mothers.⁴⁴

Harris says that Seneca tells of weak babies as well who were disposed of. Seneca quotes an orator named Clodius Turrinus who says “many fathers are in the habit of exposing offspring who are no good. Some right from birth are damaged in some part of their bodies, weak and hopeless. Their parents throw them out rather than expose them.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ Harris, “Child-Exposure,” 14.

⁴² *Twelve Tables*, ed. and trans. E.H. Warmington (London: William Heinemann LTD, 1967), IV.1.

⁴³ Harris, “Child-Exposure,” 12.

⁴⁴ Philo, *The Special Laws*, trans. F. H. Colson (London: William Heinemann LTD, 1968), III.114-115.

⁴⁵ The Elder Seneca, *Controversiae*, trans. M. Winterbottom (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 10.4.16.

However, the idea of “weak” is a broad one and the criteria for it given by Soranus are so extensive and strict that it would have resulted in a vast number of rejections. Some of the criteria given by Soranus were that the mother must have been in good health during her pregnancy, must not have given birth prematurely, the infant must cry energetically, all its limbs and organs must be in good shape, “its sense organs must work, its orifices must all open, the movements of each part of the body must be neither sluggish nor weak, and the articulation of the limbs must be correct.”⁴⁶ Soranus was a physician in the Roman Empire during the second century A.D.⁴⁷ so he knew what he was talking about when he described a “weak” infant, however he does not tell what would happen to them so it is left to one’s imagination. Boswell says that very likely death was the result for deformed infants because very few people wished to adopt them.⁴⁸ This may be why the Twelve Tables permitted the killing of deformed infants when there is no other mention of infanticide in the laws.

Harris says that the most common reasons for exposing infants were economic. Economic historians of ancient societies cannot doubt that many infants were born into families where simply feeding one more child meant taking food from another person that was already starving. Economic reasons ranged from intense poverty to a desire to safeguard a family’s property in a society where tradition dictated that the property be divided equally among all heirs. Dividing property among all the heirs when a father died could only happen so many times before a family would be poor, so the wealthy tried to

⁴⁶ Harris, “Child-Exposure,” 12.

⁴⁷ *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Soranus.”

⁴⁸ Boswell, 21.

limit the number of children they raised.⁴⁹ Lactantius says that “If a man is too poor to bring up his children, it would be better if he kept away from intercourse with his wife rather than destroy works of God with his own criminal hands.”⁵⁰ This is showing that Lactantius acknowledges an economic reason for exposing a child for the poor, but he would rather that they abstain from sex and the possibility of getting pregnant than having to kill a child made from God. Legislation alludes to handing over children as pledges, possibly as a payment for loans; parents would have hoped that when the children had worked off their parent’s loans that they would be able to reclaim their children.⁵¹

Boswell says that “Apparently public opinion considered it less reprehensible for the poor to expose their children than for the wealthy to do so.”⁵² Harris says that there are a range of Greek and Roman sources that indicate that poverty was assumed to be the common reason for exposing a child. Although it seems unquestionable that families living beyond the level of subsistence exposed their children as well. “Musonius reserves his bitterest comments for those who exposed infants they could well afford to bring up.”⁵³ The story of *Daphnis and Chloe*, by the author Longus, is a love story between two exposed children. Near the end of story one of the fathers have found his son and as he is talking to the son he exposed he says

I married a wife, my dear sons, when I was yet very young, and after a while it was my happiness (so I thought it) to be a father. For first I had a son born, the second a daughter, and then Astylus the third. I thought there was enow of the breed; and therefore I exposed this boy, who was born

⁴⁹ Harris, “Child-Exposure,” 13.

⁵⁰ Lactantius, 376.

⁵¹ Boswell, 18.

⁵² Boswell, 18.

⁵³ Harris, “Child-Exposure,” 13.

after the rest, and set him out with those toys, not for the tokens of his stock but for sepulchral ornaments. But Fortune had other thoughts and counsels about him. For so it was that my eldest son and my daughter died on the same disease upon one and the same day...So do not thou, when it comes in thy mind that thou wast exposed, take it unkindly or think evil of me; for it was not with a willing mind.⁵⁴

This shows that he was a wealthy man who after having three children decided that he did not need to raise anymore so he exposed his fourth child when it was born, he felt he had a sufficient family. When he mentions the sepulchral ornaments it sounds as if he was not expecting the child to survive so when he loses his oldest son and his daughter he is excited to find that his fourth son had indeed survived. He wants to make it known at the end of the passage as well that while he may have exposed his son he did not do it willingly.

Children that were born into slavery may have been at a smaller risk of exposure than the children of the free born. It would have been contradictory to expose a slave child because the child would soon have economic value that the owner would be able to take advantage of. It still happened though, even to healthy infants.⁵⁵ Seneca said that “Some even cast out home-bred slave children, when they are born under an evil star or are physically weak.”⁵⁶ Freeborn infants may have ended up as slaves because in the first century A.D. the demand for slaves was huge, possibly close to half a million or more, on average each year. The most common ways of supplying the empire with slaves was slaves born to slaves, trade with other countries, and warfare; and these were not likely to have met the demand sufficiently. Yet, there does not seem to have been a lack of slaves

⁵⁴ Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe*, trans. George Thornley, revised J.M. Edmonds (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), IV.24.

⁵⁵ Harris, “Child-Exposure,” 14.

⁵⁶ Seneca, 10.4.16.

in the empire. The slack seems to have been taken up by infants that had been abandoned and picked up by strangers. Some of these strangers may have just been looking for slaves for themselves but more than likely the strangers were actually slave-dealers or their agents. Harris says that many Roman slaves came from regions where exposure was widespread and that nursing contracts from Egypt have been found where it is clear that the slave-owner is contracting with a wet-nurse to take care of the slave infants in his possession. Some of the children mentioned in these contracts are specifically said to have been foundlings, meaning they were infants that had been found after having been abandoned by their parents and picked up by a slaver-dealer or slave-owner. There is good reason, as well, to assume that many of the children that were found became a common source of slave prostitutes.⁵⁷ If parents could just sell them into slavery and make money off of their children, why would they not do that? Sometimes they were, however, many of the children that would have been found would have been the offspring of citizen parents and it was taboo to consider selling a Roman citizen into slavery. It was something that should not be allowed to happen and many Greeks felt that it was worse to sell a citizen infant into slavery than it was to expose it.⁵⁸

Female slaves might have been seen as excessive mouths to feed in a small family so they may have been exposed anyway.⁵⁹ Female slaves were not the only female infants to be at risk of exposure. Poseidippos, a third century comic poet, said that “Everyone raises a son, including the poor; but even a rich man exposes a daughter.”⁶⁰ Females required a dowry when they got married, and poor families could only be able to afford

⁵⁷ Harris, “Child-Exposure,” 18-19.

⁵⁸ Harris, “Child-Exposure,” 19.

⁵⁹ Harris, “Child-Exposure,” 14.

⁶⁰ Boswell, 18-19.

so many dowries. So if they had too many daughters they may decide to expose some in order to not have to pay the dowries to get them married off. Harris says the early age at marriage resulted in more children than parents, or at least fathers thought they could support, and this was the main cause of child-exposure.⁶¹ Mark Golden, however, says that it is not as clear if females were really exposed more often than males. The issue of gender is important because it can show the position of women in a society. Parents that exposed their newborn daughters were not doing it out of any actual hostility towards them, but the tendency to expose daughters over sons would show and imply that men were more valued and that it was more important to raise a son over a daughter.⁶² Yet, despite Poseidippus' claim, there is some other literary evidence that show that female infants were just as welcome as male infants. Primary evidence of exposure, or infanticide is scattered and fragmentary, so it is dangerous to make any proof positive claims about social practices such as this.⁶³

Golden has another theory for why females may have been exposed more often than males; it is called the marriage squeeze. He believes that even in a society that practiced female infanticide all men would be able to marry if they were willing to wait.⁶⁴ One of his sources, Birdsell, "has shown that even in bands that kill up to 50 percent of their female newborns every man can marry—provided that girls marry young (between 11 and 14), most men marry at around 40, and some younger men marry widows."⁶⁵ Golden assumes that men were married younger than Birdsell thought, at about the age of

⁶¹ Harris, "Child-Exposure," 13-14.

⁶² Golden, "Demography," 316.

⁶³ Golden, "Demography," 316-317.

⁶⁴ Golden, "Demography," 320.

⁶⁵ Golden, "Demography," 321.

30 and that women were married at about half, at somewhere between 14 and 18 years of age. This age difference means that there would be the marriage squeeze if all infants that made it past two years of age were raised. One in five or six females would not find husbands when it was time to get married and unfortunately these women would create a drain on the economy because their fathers would have to take care of them. The longer they went without getting married the less likely it was to happen. Unmarried daughters were a personal and family tragedy. Due to this he believes that infanticide was a must for the ancient society. A father of a newborn girl would not know the demographic numbers like demographers do today, but he would know what it would cost to raise a daughter, the risk that she may not find a husband, and he would know his economic status for raising the children he already has. He may decide that it would be better to just expose his daughter. Golden believes that a society would be able to survive and continue to grow with a ten percent exposure rate of females.⁶⁶

Infanticide also had a purpose in ancient Rome. It was a primary way of regulating family size and shape. Unlike abortion and contraception, which were unreliable, exposure allowed Romans to control the population by allowing them to choose the sex of their children.⁶⁷ Boswell quotes P.A. Brunt as saying that even those that cannot obtain an abortion could still choose to expose their newborn.⁶⁸ *Expositio* was superior to other methods of regulating the size of the family. It did not violate conscience or law in most of Europe like infanticide, abortion, and most forms of contraception did. *Expositio* was also preferred because it did not disrupt the family

⁶⁶ Golden, "Demography," 322-326.

⁶⁷ Harris, "Child-Exposure," 11.

⁶⁸ Boswell, 14.

stability or conjugal relations. It allowed flexibility in the family planning that nothing else provided, including abstinence. It would allow the parents to know the gender as well as the health of the child before they would decide if they wanted to accept the child into their household. In this way families were able to regulate the total number of family members in their household, adjust the sex ratios, and compensate for weak or sickly children.⁶⁹ Depending on the method of *expositio* that was used and the circumstances of the abandonment, “they could even keep track of the child without bearing any legal responsibility for his upbringing, education, dowry, or inheritance.”⁷⁰ These advantages, and the lack of moral or legal sanctions against the act, *expositio* was one of the major reasons and a more likely explanation than infanticide for the low numbers of children per family found in premodern societies.⁷¹ Boswell says that the benefits of *expositio* are magnified at the social level.

As opposed to contraception, abortion, or infanticide, *expositio* built much demographic flexibility into societies that tolerated it. *Expositio* allowed shifting of population from overcrowded to underpopulated areas; transformed potentially dangerous burdens on hard-pressed families – or permanent shame to unwed mothers – into welcome additions to other families or communities.⁷²

This shows that though *expositio* may have been seen as something to that was negative; it still could have been seen as a positive practice for a society.

Exposure was a good way to transfer potential labor from freedom to slavery.

Harris says that the economic role of exposure was derived primarily from the fact that

⁶⁹ Boswell, 31.

⁷⁰ Boswell, 31.

⁷¹ Boswell, 31.

⁷² Boswell, 31.

many rescued infants became slaves. One of the reasons why exposure was accepted was that it helped the labor supply.⁷³

There were many different possibilities for what may have happened to infants that were abandoned. Harris says that one might assume that very few infants survived, but evidence for either side is hard to interpret. He then goes on to say later that many exposed infants did in reality survive, especially perhaps in areas where and at times when slaves were in high demand. Enslavement was the most common fate of infants that were rescued.⁷⁴ Some were adopted into families that were either childless or whose children had all passed away. Boswell points out that children who were picked up and reared, whether as the child of the rescuer, or as a slave, could not have been a victim of infanticide.⁷⁵

The dangers of abandoning an infant by the side of the road were numerous, critical, and severe.⁷⁶ The fear of children being eaten by wild animals is most likely where the numerous ancient legends about infants being suckled and cared for by the animals came from. Such as the legend about the twins Romulus and Remus who were the founders of the city of Rome that were abandoned by their parents and suckled and raised by a wolf. The ancient historian, Livy, wrote down the legend of Romulus and Remus, and in his mind the twins were only saved because Faustulus hoped that the twins were of royal blood.⁷⁷

⁷³ Harris, "Child-Exposure," 1-2, 10.

⁷⁴ Harris, "Child-Exposure," 9.

⁷⁵ Boswell, 13.

⁷⁶ Harris, "Child-Exposure," 8.

⁷⁷ Harris, "Child-Exposure," 9-10.

Parents that exposed their children sometimes would do so in a way that the children would be found easily and quickly so that they can be rescued, usually by leaving them somewhere that was known for abandoned infants.⁷⁸ The most widespread method of *expositio* was to leave the child somewhere, some of the most common places were roadsides, hillsides, or in the woods. Some of the common places for dropping off infants got names related for this purpose, such as Rome's *lactaria* because the infants were found quickly.⁷⁹ In the Forum Holitorium in Rome there was the *lactaria columna* Festus gave the explanation that "there they used to bring down infants who needed to be fed with milk."⁸⁰

Many exposed infants seem to have been clothed. If an infant was abandoned naked it was a sign of parents that did not want their children to survive. Usually the infants are left with some kind of trinkets. These trinkets would have been used for later recognition of parents abandoned infants. However, these trinkets often resembled grave goods so "no conclusions should be drawn from this practice about the likelihood of survival."⁸¹ Many parents would have hoped that the interest or compassion of someone would allow the child to survive, but they could not be completely confident that it would happen.⁸² For the most part the children that were picked up and raised were entirely at the kindness of those that found them and nurtured them. They may have been "educated or not; well or ill fed; forced to work or not; abused sexually or not – all at the whim of

⁷⁸ Harris, "Child-Exposure," 9.

⁷⁹ Boswell, 14-15.

⁸⁰ Harris, "Child-Exposure," 9.

⁸¹ Harris, "Child-Exposure," 9.

⁸² Harris, "Child-Exposure," 9.

the *nutritor*, who might adopt them as his own children, simply employ them in his household or business, sell them, or enslave them.”⁸³

Harris also gives five fluctuating factors, in addition to the child’s luck, for the survival chances of an abandoned infant:

(1) his or her initial physical condition; (2) how much the exposers did to help the infant to survive – and here there are a range of intentions, from lethal to desperately hopeful; (3) whether the community included persons willing to invest in bringing up the child as a slave (there were clearly places in Egypt and Asia Minor and probably in Achaea and Syria and Italy, where it was common for exposed infants to be collected); (4) the level of demand for slave labour [sic]; and (5) gender – boys were more likely to be rescued than girls.⁸⁴

These show that there were many different outcomes for an abandoned infant. Deformed children may not have lasted as long as healthy children and their parents may not have wanted them to survive anyway. Communities that were in need of slaves would have rescued more infants than communities that were poor and had no need for them.

Depending on how the society felt the sex ratio was at any one time may have determined how many males versus females were rescued from the side of the road or wherever an infant had been left.

Infants had to survive past their first year of life and infant mortality was high, “perhaps between 30 and 40 per cent.”⁸⁵ These deaths were expected and epitaphs still in existence today show that children who died under the age of two were never said to have

⁸³ Boswell, 25.

⁸⁴ Harris, “Child-Exposure,” 11.

⁸⁵ Mark Golden, “Did the Ancients Care When Their Children Died?” *Greece & Rome* 35 (1988): 155.

been “untimely;” however, this is used often and is sometimes applied to people in their seventies.⁸⁶ Due to the high infant mortality rate many people got married young.

One source for looking at how parents felt about their children is funerary epigraphy. Epigraphy is inscriptions that scholars look at to study a wide range of topics. In this instance funerary epigraphy is the inscriptions left on tombs or to mark a grave, and especially the epigraphy left for young children is of interest. However, this source is biased towards the upper classes and how they may have felt because the lower classes were not always able to afford funerary art or tombstones. There is an altar from Ostia that is of a five-year old boy named A. Egrilius Magnus who is portrayed with his pet goat that is from about the middle of the first century A.D.⁸⁷ It is from about the start of when children started to appear more prominently in altars, inscriptions, and funerary monuments.

Children are not widely seen in art in ancient Rome until about 17 BC under Caesar Augustus who tried to push a very pro-family agenda and in 17 BC he held the Secular Games. In the years 18 and 17 B.C. Augustus tried to set in motion legislation that made adultery a crime and made marriage obligatory and offered privileges to married people. He also gave rewards to families that had children.⁸⁸ The Secular Games came the year after the legislation was passed. The Games then featured children greatly and in a new way.⁸⁹ It celebrated fertility and focused on mothers and children.⁹⁰ In the

⁸⁶ Golden, “Did the Ancients Care,” 155.

⁸⁷ Beryl Rawson, “The Iconography of Roman Childhood,” in *The Roman Family in Italy: Status, Sentiment, Space*, ed. Beryl Rawson and Paul Weaver. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 220.

⁸⁸ *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Augustus.”

⁸⁹ Rawson, “Iconography,” 206-207.

⁹⁰ Rawson, “Iconography,” 213.

Republican art just before the switch to the imperial rule featured mainly public life and focused on the adult male Roman citizen, but by the time Augustus had established his rule private life was gaining an interest and he was able to capitalize on this.⁹¹ His altar the Ara Pacis had real children from his family and neighboring countries in prominent positions in many of the friezes.⁹² Shortly after the Ara Pacis was dedicated private memorials dedicated to families became common, many of them dedicated to freedmen but also children were memorialized, just not in the same numbers. The Imperial family gave special attention to family and the numbers started to rise. Between the years of 13 BC and AD 5 the numbers of funerary reliefs for children increased considerably.⁹³ Funerary reliefs were not the only places children turned up at this time.

Children were also starting to show up in literature. Tragedies were written where children are doomed and they “are described with a mixture of pathos and keen observation which surely reflects affection when they are alive and sorrow at their death.”⁹⁴ Euripides, a playwright who wrote the play *Medea* in 431 B.C.⁹⁵ has a scene where Medea, a mother, must give up her children because she is being banished to another land. As she is saying good-bye she is lamenting the loss of her children. She says, “Oh my babes, my babes, let your mother kiss your hands. Ah! hands I love you so well, O lips most dear to me! O noble form and features of my children, I wish ye joy...O the sweet embrace, the soft young cheek, the fragrant breath! my children!”⁹⁶

⁹¹ Rawson, “Iconography,” 208-211.

⁹² Rawson, “Iconography,” 213.

⁹³ Rawson, “Iconography,” 216-217.

⁹⁴ Golden, “Did the Ancients Care,” 152.

⁹⁵ *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Euripides.”

⁹⁶ Euripides, *Medea*, trans. Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O’Neill, Jr. (New York: Random House, 1938), 1066-1069.

Golden makes a comparison to other cultures with a high infant mortality rate that make sure their children are in almost constant proximity with a custodian and that their wants and needs are taken care of immediately.⁹⁷ Despite their constant attention and care the children still died. Golden says that there is three reasons why a parent might not feel as much grief as one might expect when an infant passed away. The first reason is that they felt they were following traditional rearing practices and did not feel the anxiety about every stage or little thing like modern day parents might. The second is that the care of children may have been divided up between numerous people even among the poor. Older children or other family members may have helped to take care of the newborn infant. If the infant died then the sense of loss and the grief was spread out among a number of people. The third reason is that there were elaborate, traditional rituals to go through when a person died to help the survivors deal with their grief. These traditions gave the parents set things to do over a period of time to help vent their feelings and it was often shared with the rest of the family and friends who would be likely to offer comfort and support because they had suffered similar experiences.⁹⁸ Golden quotes M.I. Finley as saying

Any Greek or Roman who reached the age of marriage could look forward to burying one or more children, often very small ones... I do not suggest that Greeks and Romans buried their children and spouses without a sense of loss... What I do suggest is that in a world in which such early deaths and burials were routine, so to speak, the intensity and duration of the emotional responses were unlike modern reactions.⁹⁹

I think this quote explains it perfectly. They would have felt the loss of their children or spouses but it would have been expected and there would have been traditions that would

⁹⁷ Golden, "Did the Ancients Care," 155.

⁹⁸ Golden, "Did the Ancients Care," 156.

⁹⁹ Golden, "Did the Ancients Care," 154.

have to be kept and that would help to keep the ancient Romans from going insane from the grief they would have felt.

In conclusion, infanticide would have been a very common occurrence in the ancient Roman world. Poverty/economic reasons, deformities, gender, and the marriage squeeze are all the most compelling reasons for infanticide or *expositio* to have occurred. While parents may have been exposing their newborn infants they still cared about their children, the ones they decided to raise as well as the children that they exposed unwillingly. Ancient historians and writers that mention infanticide in some way all seem to agree that children were abandoned. They may not have agreed on the acceptance of the practice but they do agree that it was something that happened in some way. They also agree that parents loved their children. Parents in modern times love their children as well, but abandonment occurs still today.

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