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# INFANT BURIALS IN IRON-AGE AND ROMAN EUROPE

## PROLEGOMENA TO A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS ROMAN DOBRUJA AND IRON-AGE GERMANY

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### Abstract

This paper deals with infant burials in Roman Dobruja and in northern Germany during the late Iron Age from a comparative perspective. In many societies (ancient and recent) infant and child burials differ from burials of adult members of the society and are thus often labelled as ‘deviant burials’. By using ethnographical evidence, this author aims to show that it is a rule rather than an exception that children are buried differently (e.g. inside settlements, under the floor of houses). The reason for such customs should be searched for in the beliefs of ancient communities and in the *rites de passage*, which can be deduced from written sources (in the case of literate societies) and/or by ethnographical comparison.

*Keywords:* infant burials, deviant burials, Roman Dobruja, Germania, Iron Age Germany

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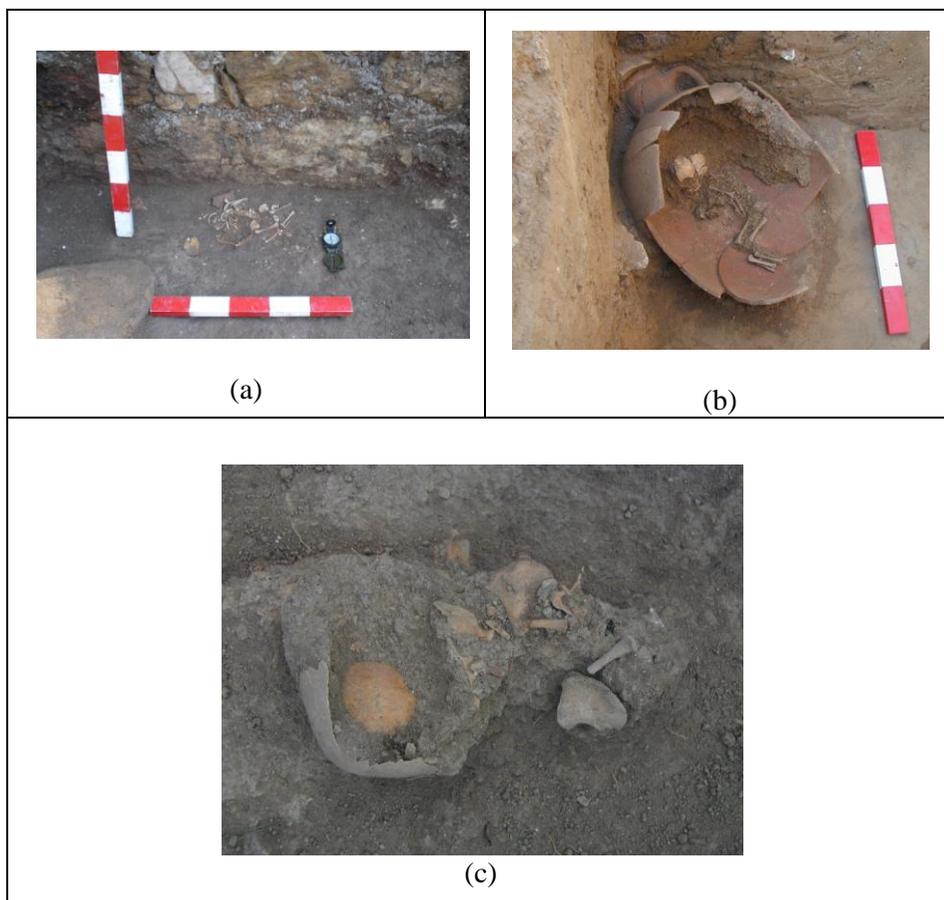
### 1. Introduction: infant burials in Roman Dobruja

At the site Ibida, Slava Rusă [1, 2], in Romanian Dobruja, the excavators (including this author) came several times across very interesting features of infant burials *intra muros*, dating from the later Roman period (mainly 4<sup>th</sup> century AD) [3]. The remains of new born babies or small infants were found near buildings or walls (in one exemplary case near the entrance of a defensive tower, under the floor, the tower having been used as a dwelling during the 4<sup>th</sup> century – see Figure 1a). In two cases the small bodies were put into larger pots, or in an amphora, for which one can find a lot of parallels in the Roman world (Figures 1b and 1c), and beyond [4]. The features discovered at Slava Rusa are not in any case unusual; there are several burials of the same kind in Dobruja and others all over the Mediterranean and the Black Sea areas [3, 5]. All of them show some common features, which can be easily recognized in Europe during the domination of the Roman Empire. Small children, especially those who died before the age of about six months, before dentition, were treated differently.

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While juveniles or adults enjoyed more lavish funeral services and were often incinerated (at least until the apogee of the Roman Empire), infants were buried in inhumation graves of that kind, evidently with not too much complexity and effort. Since I refer to Roman customs, I will also mention some important information from literary sources, which help us to understand the ideological aspects of the different treatment of very young children. The above-mentioned facts indicate that several social aspects should also be taken into account, and that childhood and parental feelings meant something different in ancient times.



**Figure 1.** Infant burial: (a) near tower wall (inside), Slava Rusă, 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, courtesy of Alexander Rubel; (b) inside a Robinson M 273 amphora, Slava Rusă, 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, courtesy of Dorel Paraschiv; (c) with potsherds, Slava Rusă, 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, courtesy of Dorel Paraschiv.

## 2. Burying children in the Roman world

Several aspects of the way the ancients dealt with the death of infants and children endorse the common view according to which what we have to deal with in the case under discussion implies a completely different set of feelings

towards children in medieval and early modern times as well as in classical antiquity. Many classicists and archaeologists thus followed Ariès in his conviction that childhood is in fact a modern concept [6]. Because of the impressive infant mortality rate in the Iron Age and the Roman Europe (at least 30-35%), many scholars joined the view according to which – in antiquity too – parents were obliged to limit their degree of psychological involvement with their infant children in order to preserve their own mental stability [3, 7].

The main argument in favour of this view is precisely the lack of child burials in the Greco-Roman World in general. In the opinion of several scholars this indicates a certain social devaluation of children. We also know of philosophical manuals for the control of feelings. Plutarch leaves us with the impression that, in antiquity, the death of infants was perceived differently from today, when he states that one accepts the death of infants happily but cannot bear the loss of an adult [Plut. Mor. 113D]. In addition, Roman legal texts refer very rarely to infants. No mourning rites, or at least less significant ones, existed for deceased babies in Greece and Rome.

The legendary Roman king Numa Pompilius is said to have restricted the degree of ritual mourning for infants [Plut. Numa 12]. Later Roman law also recommended that no ritual mourning be accorded children who died within the first twelve months of their lives. Only limited ritual mourning could be bestowed upon children who died between the ages of one and three [Frag. Vat. 321 (Ulpian)], [8, 9]. Romans were thus considered to be uncaring parents from a modern point of view, because of the demographic conditions, which were thought to have had a great influence on psychological reactions towards the death of children. This view has only recently been challenged [3].

In their writings and private letters upper-class members of Roman society (such as Cicero, Seneca or Pliny) insisted that one should not publicly show grief and mourning. This in fact indicates that substantial parts of the society (even the upper classes) did not observe conventional rules. They did mourn and show grief when confronted with the death of an infant [E. g. Cic. Tusc. 1, 39, 93]. The best example is the cruel emperor Nero. Tacitus severely criticized him because Nero publicly and excessively (that is, without any control of his feelings) mourned for his baby son, who died only four months after his birth [Tac. Ann. 15, 23].

A large number of funeral inscriptions dedicated to the memory of deceased infants and children point in the same direction. For example, in the well-known inscription for Hateria Superba, who lived only one-and-a-half years, we are confronted with the grief of the *infelicissimi* parents, who erected a stone relief for their beloved daughter, showing her in the midst of her favourite pets [CIL VI 19159]. This is not the place to list all the inscriptions of this kind, which indicate that keeping the memory of deceased small children was a very important issue [8, 10]. The language of the funeral inscriptions monumentalizes grief and loss. It is an expression of the feelings of parents, who evidently loved their small children. There are many very young children commemorated in epitaphs, some only a year old, another only five months (Ostia) and a baby-boy

from Lyon, by the name of Salvius Felix, who was only 20 days old when he died [CIL XIV 570, CIL XIII 2255], [11]. “Although Roman society did not expect parents to commemorate very young infants, the fact that many parents did can be interpreted as an expression of genuine loss and grief.” [10, p. 201]

On the other hand, the evident lack of such superb funeral monuments in rural environments probably indicates more social differences. Rather, it has implications of social status and prosperity (or the lack of it), rather than of indifference towards babies and children [7, p. 220-223]. This explains – in the well-documented case of Roman Italy – why, in urban centres (especially Rome and Ostia), we find far more representative funeral monuments than in the countryside [8].

Perhaps the special treatment of *infantes* in Roman funeral practice, the refusal of full funeral rites and the prescribed prohibition of mourning can be better understood from the social rather than from the psychological point of view. Minors and especially babies were not considered to be full members of society. Certain rites of passage had to be performed during childhood and adolescence. We can therefore think in terms of ritual prohibitions and general rules, which did not affect feelings of love and affection. Burial rites in Rome, as for the elite of the empire, always made use of the occasion to display social standing and family pride. Thus children would be commemorated mainly in urban and or elite contexts as part of family strategies of representation [8]. Some of these general observations on the role of status and rites of passage in the Roman world appear to be cultural universals, as cultural anthropology suggests (see below).

In sum, we have to be careful to suggest parental indifference towards children in ancient societies from the lack of funerary evidence in the case of children, or from some social practice related to the funerals of those who had not yet passed the necessary rites of passage to become full members of society.

But still the fact remains that funerals of infants and small children usually differed very much from the ones of adults. Against this background we still have to clarify what was particularly ‘Roman’ about this different treatment of dead infants, by analyzing other regions and by taking into account the findings of cultural anthropology.

### **3. Social anthropology and infant burial**

If we take a look at other periods and also at other regions of the world, including ethnographical records, we can draw some conclusions on the whole problem of child burials and the anthropological context of different treatment of deceased infants and children. If we consider the general tendency reported by archaeologists all over Europe about the features of infant burials, we are bound to observe some striking evidence: For nearly all ancient cultures archaeologists report a considerable lack of child burials, especially infant burials in necropoleis (when compared to assumed infant mortality, somewhere between 35-50%) [12-15].

There are several explanations for this evident lack of child graves in ancient cemeteries. Some scholars consider taphonomic reasons and blame the negligence of (especially former generations of) archaeologists, who seem not to have taken note of the very tender remains of small children during excavations. Indeed, there are some regions, where the soil rarely preserves remains of infants. Another explanation is the theory of massive child abandonment and infanticide in ancient times, a presumed practice of societies with very limited resources, which is, on the other hand, nearly impossible to prove by means of archaeological methods [14, 16]. The most reasonable explanation is the one which focuses on ‘deviant burials’ for infants (and often for pre-teens children, too) [17, 18]. In our case ‘deviant burial’ implies entombment of infants in places and conditions other than those reserved for adults.

From Ancient Mesopotamia to early Medieval Central Europe we have much evidence suggesting the frequent occurrence of infant burials inside settlements, even inside houses or in special cemeteries for children [13, 14, 19-21]. The conclusion that results from archaeological findings – namely that children, and especially babies, received special funerals – is confirmed by the ethnographical evidence. Schwidetzky, Häusler and Wahl exhaustively compiled burial-practices for different age-groups of recent indigenous societies all over the world [17, 98f; 22]. Of their vast data I will mention only some examples: Chukchi people (Siberia) incinerated adults, but buried children in hollow trees. Huron Indians (northern America) buried children under two month age at the roadside. Some Lower-Kongo tribes as well as the Salish Indians (USA) buried babies near the hut of their mother, so that they should remain near her. The Bhotias (of the Himalaya Mountains) bury all children who died before dentition, all others being incinerated. The Bataks (Sumatra) buried babies who died before dentition behind the house under the gutter, others being buried outside the village. The Nandis in Kenya are said to bury small children before dentition and old people who had lost their teeth; all other deceased people are dumped outside the settlements to become food for the hyenas.

If we keep in mind what Pliny said about the customs among all people not to cremate children before dentition, all these examples lead to the idea that of the many possible factors which determined different cultures all over the world to treat dead infants differently dentition appears to be an important one. Dentition probably marks a very important period of life in many cultures and seems to be considered as an important transformation stage (other such stages being linked to initiation rites).

Social anthropologists make it clear that behind the different treatment of infants and children in burial customs there lie certain beliefs. In some cultures children (before a certain culturally significant age) are thought to have a ‘different’ soul, other than the one of adults. Children before a certain age are not yet part of the (adult-dominated) community. Children could also have certain ‘magical’ links to the other world, to the ancestors, etc. It seems to be very probable that such beliefs can be assumed for prehistoric societies too.

If we consider all the archaeological and ethnographical data, it can hardly be said anymore that infant burials are ‘deviant burials’ [18]. Infant burials inside settlements, or in special cemeteries (apart from adults) represent the usual way of treating dead babies and children before a certain age – which certainly differs from culture to culture, as also indicated within ancient societies. Therefore, we should keep in mind that different burial customs for children are the rule and not the exception in Europe too, up until medieval times. This custom accounts for the evident lack of child burials in necropoleis (better than presumed infanticide, building sacrifice, etc.).

As another case study, to the description of the Roman customs – widespread all around the Roman Empire – I would like to add the example of infant burials in (northern) Germany [23].

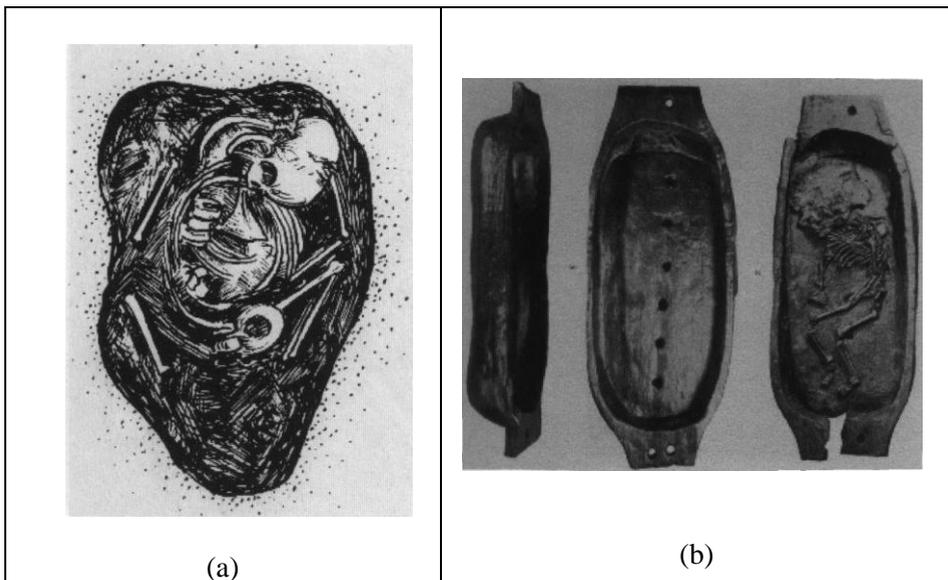
#### **4. Infant burials in Iron age Germany**

The latter region is interesting also because it represents exactly the fringe of the Roman Empire. While, somehow, the Rhine marked the border towards the Germanic tribes in the north-east, Roman influence reached far beyond the Limes [24, 25]. To go back to the European Neolithic, and especially the Neolithic the Ancient Orient, it is worth mentioning that archaeologists have found much evidence for infant burials inside houses and inside settlements [4; 20; 21; 23, p. 135-140, 147-149]. Especially in the southern parts of Europe and the Near East burials inside settlements and houses appear to have been very common. Also in Central Europe one finds a lot of features which suggest the common custom of burials inside settlements (burials of infants and children predominating) [21; 23, p. 149-153].

Interestingly, in Bronze-Age northern and central Europe such features were no longer common, and – except very rare cases – in the area under discussion archaeologists did not find traces of the above-mentioned burial custom for small children, often associated with ideas of care, protection and closeness to the family. Similar was the situation during the early La Tène period, for which several child burials inside settlements have been attested in Celtic settlements in today’s France, Switzerland or Spain [23, p. 154-158]. Beginning with Roman times in Central Europe, that is, during the late La Tène period, there is notable increase in the number of features belonging to burials inside houses and settlements in northern Germany, up to Denmark, infants predominating in regard to such features, as Beilke-Voigt stated. In the past many such burials were – falsely – interpreted by archaeologists as examples of human sacrifice or building sacrifice. In this context we can mention the burial of a nursling under a hearth in the Germanic terp-village of Feddersen Wierde, which is dated to the early Roman Empire (Figure 2a) [26, 27].

Other interesting features of carefully buried babies belong to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and to the migration period (among others). Remarkable is the skeleton of a 4-6-month-old nursling buried in a trough made of birch wood, in

the wharf-village of Tofting in Schleswig-Holstein, northern Germany (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, Figure 2b) [23, p. 158-166].



**Figure 2.** Nursling: (a) under the hearth, Feddersen Wierde, 1<sup>st</sup> century AD; (b) buried in a trough made of birch wood, in the wharf-village of Tofting, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD [13].



**Figure 3.** Infant buried under the hearth, Hessens, 6<sup>th</sup> century AD [13].

Also under the hearth of a house, in the terp-village of Hessens in Lower Saxony, an infant was buried (wrapped in woollen material) together with a small pot as grave furniture (6<sup>th</sup> century AD, Figure 3) [28]. In connection with the well-known features of Roman Germany or of the Limes area (e.g. at Rheinzabern [29], or at Sontheim/Brenz [30]), as well as with similar features known from the migration period and the early Middle Ages [12], one could

perhaps think about the spread of the (certainly not exclusively) ‘Roman’ burial custom for infants before dentition as a common feature in northern and eastern Germany; also, there are some data regarding similar features in Poland [23, p. 165], and there is some (very interpretable) information, in the same respect, from pre-Roman and Roman Dacia [31].

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