

Review article

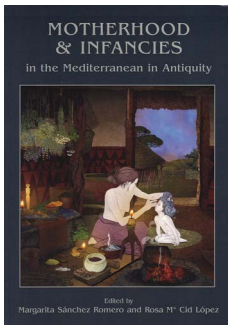
Women and children first

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PATRICK BEAUCHESNE & SABRINA C. AGARWAL (ed.). 2018. *Children and childhood in bioarchaeology*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida; 978-0-8130-5680-7 \$110.

MARGARITA SÁNCHEZ ROMERO & ROSA CID LÓPEZ (ed.). 2018. *Motherhood and infancies in the Mediterranean in antiquity*. Oxford: Oxbow; 978-1-78925-038-1 £40.

MEREDITH A.B. ELLIS. 2019. *The children of Spring Street: the bioarchaeology of childhood in a 19th century abolitionist congregation*. Cham: Springer; 978-3-319-92686-5 \$89.99



The last two decades have seen an exponential rise in scholarly interest and research into childhood, and children, in the past (e.g. Scheuer & Black 2005; Baxter 2005; Lewis 2007; Finlay 2013; Halcrow *et al.* 2018). Multiple publi-

cations have explored the scholarly origins of the field, detailing its complex and multidisciplinary development (Prout 2005; Halcrow & Tayles 2008; Lillehammer 2015; Mays *et al.* 2017). Several authors (e.g. Lillehammer 2015; Mays *et al.* 2017) have also, very successfully, synthesised extant research themes and investigations, and proposed future research directions. Consequently, although this field is in its relative infancy, its voice is louder than ever as the importance of studies of childhood and children in the past is realised.

Within a range of disciplines (e.g. history, anthropology, archaeology, sociology and psychology), the role of the child, and the ability to understand the nature of childhood, has become a central research theme.

While approaches vary—from ethnographic studies to bioarchaeological analyses of child skeletal remains, to the examination of historic records and literature—the ‘child’ has become a distinct identity. This is not to say that there are not still limitations within the discipline that need to be addressed. Integrating children and childhood into existing narratives of the past is not easy and requires understanding and consideration of the societies, cultures and peoples being studied. We might begin by asking: how is a child defined? And are these parameters social, cultural or biological? A perfect example of such complexity can be demonstrated by the continuing debate around the terminology associated with young individuals; are they non-adults, juveniles, infants or children? Should there be a collective term? Should ascribed terminology reflect age, or instead relate to social identities? Such a debate is not easily resolved, with each discipline privileging its own terminology, which is appropriate to the investigation being undertaken. This issue, then, serves to highlight the complexities not only of integrating ‘children’ into our narratives as a whole, but also of the difficulties in distinguishing between ‘children’ themselves and their identities, agency and experiences, all of which are entirely individual. Yet, despite these terminological incongruencies and theoretical caveats, the importance of increasing research into the lives and experiences of these young individuals in the past is readily acknowledged across a range of disciplines.

The three volumes reviewed here significantly contribute to the body of literature on childhood in the past. The volumes compiled by Beauchesne and Agarwal, and by Sánchez Romero and Cid López, both synthesise collections of papers demonstrating the extraordinary breadth of interdisciplinary research, while the final work, by Ellis, takes a unique approach, tracing childhood lives and experiences in the New York of the 1800s.

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The collaboration between Beuchesne and Agarwal is well established, with the pair having co-authored numerous papers regarding the skeletal analysis of children in the past. Consequently, both scholars are well placed to tackle the challenge of condensing the central research concerns within childhood bioarchaeology into a single volume. Considering the vast array of studies that could have contributed to this volume, shortlisting what to include must have been an unenviable task.

In the field of bioarchaeology, and childhood bioarchaeology in particular, novel methodologies for investigating young individuals are developing rapidly, as the importance of skeletal analysis of infants and children becomes globally recognised. The success of this volume lies in its ability to draw this research together, to showcase both what is possible in, and the potential results of, the bioarchaeological study of children. The volume devotes at least one chapter to each of the key aspects of childhood bioarchaeology, from research focused on weaning and dietary patterns through isotopic studies, to investigations of trauma or violence, health, disease and stress, as well as theoretical considerations of mortality patterns and community-wide behaviour and treatment of children. The impressive diversity is matched by the geographic and chronological range of these studies.

Beuchesne and Agarwal make it clear that this volume seeks to address the continued dearth of skeletal investigations into past children and childhood. The social and cultural aspects of childhood have been extensively considered within archaeology, yet the physical remains of children themselves are often overlooked. By focusing on the *bio*-archaeology of childhood, this volume places the child skeleton at the centre of its studies; while interpretations and discussions woven around these skeletons are multifaceted, results primarily arise from the physical, skeletal evidence.

The volume has two broad strands; there is a biocultural section and another focusing on life histories and the life course. This theoretical approach acknowledges the need to revisit investigations into children and childhood using these methodologies. While this approach is innovative, it is not entirely successful. It becomes evident that distinguishing between these approaches and categorising individual studies as either 'biocultural' or 'life history' is challenging. Many of the chapters could have successfully been situated within either of the sections, as these themes commonly overlap.

The overarching theme uniting the initial chapters is social and cultural practice, including attitudes to and behaviour towards children. The strength of these chapters is in their ability to subvert the traditional notion of childhood, often considered through a Western lens. Childhood is a cultural construct and thus, the assumption that childhood is universally similar is not only inappropriate, but limits our own understanding and interpretations. Throughout the volume, the 'child' is afforded agency and identity, both in determining processes, such as breastfeeding and weaning (e.g. Moffat & Prowse; Pearson), but also in fulfilling social roles indicative of the attainment of personhood and adulthood (e.g. Klaus; Toyne).

Chapters 6–10 excel in the range of evidence considered, and in bringing evidence of childhood stress and health disruption to the fore (e.g. Gosman *et al.*; Temple; Gowland & Newman; Wheeler *et al.*). These contributions highlight social inequality—as a reflection of ascribed social identities, shifting population dynamics, or simply poverty and low status—as central in regulating childhood wellbeing. Children reflect social adversity and inequality more clearly than adults, and the contributions here demonstrate this. Thus, children and their skeletons become the best indicators of both individual and community wellbeing. These findings serve to enhance the life-course approach that these chapters have endeavoured to take, demonstrating the impact and longevity that childhood experiences can have. Skeletal analyses have the unique ability to consider not only the circumstances immediately surrounding death, but also those that have become etched into the skeleton. Consequently, such studies provide unrivalled insights about individuals who died in childhood, and into the childhoods of those who were able to survive to adulthood.

This volume accurately reflects the current state of childhood bioarchaeology, showcasing a diverse range of research topics, themes and methods. The papers in the volume are united in demonstrating the substantial progress of the discipline. While bioarchaeological studies have dramatically increased the visibility of children and childhood in the archaeological record, this volume also situates children at the heart of these narratives, ensuring that they are no longer marginalised in research dialogues.

Motherhood and infancies in the Mediterranean in antiquity is the seventh instalment of the Society for the Study of Childhood in the Past monograph series, which aims to provide a forum for multidisciplinary

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studies presenting new insights into childhood in the past. This volume accomplishes that brief, providing a plethora of studies from various disciplines investigating childhood in the Mediterranean in antiquity.

The volume originated from a seminar entitled 'Maternities and Childhood', organised by Sánchez Romero and Cid López. This seminar saw discussions centring on the relationship between mothers and their children, and reflecting particularly on the roles of Mediterranean women, mothers and children in antiquity. The 21 chapters provide the most thorough synthesis of childhood and perceptions of children in the ancient Mediterranean to date. It has an extraordinary breadth of contributions including papers focusing on: maternal death, childhood involvement in ceramic production, relationships between children and animals, representations of women in Roman poetry, and even modern representations of women and mothers in school textbooks. The roles of women, children and mothers in antiquity, together with the relationships between them, are explored through a multidisciplinary range of studies. Sources include: material culture (Chapters 2–3 & 7–8); epigraphic and iconographic sources (Chapters 5, 8, 10, 12–13 & 16); child burials (Chapters 6–7) and texts and literature (Chapters 4–5, 9, 11–12, 14–15 & 17–21). Although the style of contributions will perhaps be unfamiliar to classical scholars, their diversity brings a welcome contrast to traditional approaches, and highlights just how varied studies of childhood in the past have become.

This volume enriches current perspectives of childhood in historical and contemporary Mediterranean societies. In particular, it emphasises the roles of women, mothers and children throughout history, and challenges the traditional approach to their investigation, where these identities are bound to those roles of mother, carer or child-bearer, and the distinction between them is masked. Containing a wealth of information and with so many different disciplinary approaches, the volume is certain to have broad appeal.

Meredith Ellis's unique volume, *The children of Spring Street: the bioarchaeology of childhood in a 19th century abolitionist congregation*, presents vivid and exhaustive insights into a historical community and sets a high standard, providing an excellent model for future studies to follow. Despite fulfilling its role as a bioarchaeological investigation, the volume has a narrative style that turns away from the traditional report-style publication, instead integrating contextual information

and skeletal data into a broader discursive work. The reader is invited to follow the journey of the children of a nineteenth-century abolitionist congregation, tracking the challenges and experiences encountered. This achieves a far more integrated and thorough account of a community and the individuals (children) within it. By breaking down the skeletal analysis by age parameters, Ellis is able to integrate less commonly considered social and contextual sources into her interpretations (e.g. municipal documents including city death records and parish burial records, as well as newspaper reports, and even sermons, personal letters and diaries written by the Reverend Ludlow and his family).

The book aims to provide a complete synthesis of the data and interpretations derived from the skeletal analysis of children from an inner-city ward in 1800s New York. It serves to highlight the multi-dimensional, and in particular biocultural, approaches that can be undertaken in this type of study. Such an exhaustive approach is not conducive to the rapid turnaround that modern academia prizes; it does, however, provide an exceptional and comprehensive reference for bioarchaeological, historical, sociological and contextual studies.

Ellis includes an exceptional amount of data in this work, presented in numerous tables and figures throughout, and excellent images clearly demonstrate and support her interpretations. Although skeletal data is truly at the centre of this text, it is carefully integrated into this narrative of the social and cultural accoutrements of life in 1800s New York.

What is perhaps most starkly highlighted in this work is the multitude of, often detrimental, ways in which child health and wellbeing is compromised by social, cultural and behavioural constraints, and by perceived expectations. These are examined through the lens of religion, revealing the church-led practices that both caused and contributed to poor health. This is not to deny that poverty and social inequality are key components of this, evidently widespread, problem; but rather to acknowledge that additional factors can compound and exacerbate existing problems. In light of contemporary global concerns about child poverty, this volume serves as a stark reminder of the importance of investment in childhood welfare, and is both timely and relevant. This work will be a valuable source for bioarchaeologists and prove a fascinating read for those interested in the historical period more generally.

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