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Archaeological and epigraphic evidence for infancy in the Roman world

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Introduction

The Roman family has become a vibrant and challenging field of study, and the growing interest in children in Roman culture can be seen as a development within this trend (Rawson 2003; Dasen 2004a; Uzzi 2005; Dasen and Späth 2010; Laes 2011; Mander 2013; Evans Grubbs and Parkin 2013). Nevertheless, studies of children tend to focus on the later phases of childhood, with few investigations of the role and significance of infants (Dasen 2009; 2011; Carroll 2011; Carroll and Graham 2014). While the Roman life-course and the social construction of ageing are occasional themes in childhood discussions (Harlow and Laurence 2002: 37-43; Rawson 2003: 134-45; Parkin 2011), the distinct life-stages of development and socialisation apparent already in the first year of life hardly feature in current discourses. In view of this imbalance in childhood studies, this chapter explores some key aspects of Roman infancy and earliest childhood, using archaeological, epigraphic, and historical evidence to gain insight into the attitudes towards the very young, and particularly those under the age of one year, in both life and death, and, sometimes, even before birth.

Infants, status and identity

We might presume that close bonds rarely were formed with the newest members of a family because, with high infant mortality (see below), so many babies died before any emotional ties could develop. Roman textual sources certainly have been influential in conveying the impression that grief for dead infants might have been inappropriate and irrelevant. Frequently cited in this context is Cicero (Tusculan Disputations 1.39.93): 'If a young child dies, the survivors ought to bear this loss with equanimity; if an infant dies in the cradle, one doesn't even complain'. This has been seen as 'one of the few preserved observations of practice', implying that the youngest members of Roman society were held in very low social esteem (Dixon 1988: 104, 113), and has led to modern assertions that Romans viewed children 'in the first month or two of life' as 'not yet really human beings' (Wileman 2005: 77). To contradict this claim, it is worth recalling the visit of the philosopher Favorinus to a friend's newborn baby whom he found 'alive and human, crying for its mother's attentions' (Aulus Gellius, Attic Nights 12).

It would be unsound methodologically to accept texts written by elite men in Rome as an accurate reflection of what the general Roman population felt about their infants and young children, since such Stoic philosophical views dictated self-control, composure, and public decorum. Nor can we deduce from them that adult Roman men of elite standing were entirely indifferent to their own offspring or even those of friends and family. All we can really say is that infants were of little significance in the context of the political and philosophical agendas that shaped both the texts of these writers and the opinions of their socially relevant audiences (Laes 2011: 8, 99).

If elite Roman literary sources imply cultural notions of infants as 'non-persons' until they reached a particular age, the archaeological and epigraphic evidence pertinent to all classes of society gives us a very different impression. Although it is difficult to define what a 'person' is, various strands of evidence can be marshalled to demonstrate that infants were not automatically regarded as of little consequence or unworthy of attention. In fact, children of

only a few months of age were already invested with various identities, as the two following examples illustrate. Little Lucius Helvius Lupus from Emerita Augusta (modern Merida) in Spain certainly was not a 'non-person' when he died at the age of eight months (Rothenberg and Blanco-Freijeiro 1981: 18, fig. 3). His epitaph records his three names (trianomina), indicating full Roman citizen status, as well as his membership as an Emeritensis in a corporate and civic body, the city of Emerita Augusta. Elsewhere, at Tavant in Gaul, a male baby already had a fixed masculine identity when he died between three and six months of age. Interred with him was a miniature sword or gladius, a full-size version of which he might have carried as an adult in the public role of a Roman soldier, had he lived to maturity (Riquier and Salé 2006: 34-6, figs. 34-6).

Throughout the first year of life, babies were fed, clothed, comforted and entertained, and an associated material culture for infants as an age group with specific needs and its own identity can be identified in the archaeological record, mainly in burial assemblages. Spouted feeding bottles of ceramics or glass are frequent finds in excavations, particularly in infant graves (Rouquet and Loridant 2000). These may have been filled with liquids, water or watery wine, according to Soranus (Gynaecology 2.21.46), to supplement the regular feed of breast milk once weaning had begun, or to feed the infant substitutes, should the mother not be able to produce milk or be too ill to breastfeed. Textile remains of swaddling clothes or little tunics worn by very young infants rarely survive (Flück and Finneiser 2009: 16-18, cat. no. 3; Gallazzi and Hadji-Minaglou 2012: 395-6, figs. 8-9), but impressions of bonnets and swaddling bands are preserved in plaster and gypsum found in graves and sarcophagi (Dasen 2010: 130-3, figs. 5.8a-b; Carroll 2012a: 138-40, pl. 21). Necklaces of amulets as protection against illness and negative forces are found in infant graves, including some particularly fine examples of carved bone, amber, glass, and metal (Dasen 2004); Bel 2012: 204, fig. 14) <(Figs. 1-2)>. Infants also were provided with various toys to distract and occupy them (Lucretius, Nature of Things 5.228; Soranus, Gynaecology 2.21.48; Messineo 1991/1992). These include rattles, in ceramics and other materials (Haffner 1974: 17, pl. 225.5; Fittà 1998: 51, figs. 68-9), and animal and human figurines of pipe-clay (Allain, Fauduet, and Tuffeau-Libre 1992: 52-3, 170, figs. 62-4), the latter almost certainly also having some kind of religious or protective function. There are many surviving pieces of miniature furniture and household items (Barbera 1991), as well as dolls and ragdolls (Cortopassi 2000), but unless they are found in infant graves, we cannot be certain that children this young began to play with such items.

Life-stages of infancy

Ancient Greek and Roman medical treatises reveal an awareness of the gradual development of the fetus in the mother's womb (Hanson 2008; Dasen 2013). The period in the womb appears to have been viewed as a sort of 'life-course'. In the fifth and fourth centuries BC, the Hippocratic authors of *The Eight Months' Child* (4, 7, 9) and The Nature of the Child (30.4) divided gestation into periods of forty days, beginning with the first forty-day period, when the danger of miscarriage was greatest, and ending in the last forty days, when the fetus gathered strength and tore through the membranes of the womb and was born.

Shortly after the baby was born, it was given its name in the dies lustricus ceremony which took place on the eighth day for girls and the ninth day for boys (Hänninen 2005; Dasen 2009). We know about the ceremony from literary sources, but it also is mentioned specifically in the epitaph of Iulia Donata from Rome who died after seeing her son receive his name (CIL VI.20427/ILS 8480). Within thirty days of birth, the legitimate citizen child

had to be registered in a declaration (professio) before a magistrate (Schulz 1942; 1943). The register of births, displayed temporarily in public, and the permanent copy in the official state archives, are further indications that an infant had a social and public persona. Painted birth notices and public expressions of joy of a more spontaneous type also existed. On a house wall at Pompeii, for example, one announces 'our daughter Iuvenilla was born in the early evening of August 2nd' (CIL IV.294).

As during pregnancy, a period of forty days is attested as critical and marked by various events and rites of passage. In the first forty days of life, according to the Hippocratics, the newborn baby gradually adjusted to its new surroundings (*The Eight Months' Child* 9, 12), and for the first forty days after birth, the wet-nurse (nutrix) (or the mother) tending to the baby was to drink water only, as any harmful food or drink would be passed on to the infant through her milk (Soranus, Gynaecology 2.14.26). The wet-nurse, a woman either of slave or free status in the employ of families with the financial means, was carefully chosen as regards her age, physique, health, and moral standards, and surviving Egyptian wet-nursing contracts on papyrus outline a rather strict regimen of diet and behaviour as a condition of employment (Soranus, Gynaeology 2.12.19-29; Tacitus, Dialogus de Oratoribus 28-9; Masciadri and Montevecchi 1984; Bradley 1986; Tawfik 1997; Laes 2011: 69-77).

From the age of forty days, the baby was gradually released from the swaddling clothes in which it had been wrapped since birth. Part of the daily routine until the swaddling bands were removed was the cleansing, massaging and moisturizing of all parts of the infant's body, a labour intensive and close-contact activity for any mother or child carer (Soranus, Gynaecology 2.16.30-5). Swaddling clothes were thought necessary to 'give firmness and an undistorted figure' to the growing baby (Soranus, Gynaecology 2.19.42), although modern research on ancient bone assemblages, such as the skeletons of the men, women and children in Herculaneum trapped and killed by the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, has suggested that swaddling might actually have contributed to the misalignment of bones and later joint problems (Capasso 2001: 635-6, 836, figs. 938-9, 1274). The dedication in Italian and Gallic sanctuaries of life-size terracotta and stone votive images of babies in swaddling clothes is a visible reminder of parental concern for the well-being of their vulnerable offspring (De Cazanove 2008) <(Fig. 2)>. Parents sought the support of the divine world for the successful negotiation of the life passage in the period of swaddling, subsequently expressing their gratitude with the gift of a suitable votive offering in the form of a swaddled baby (Graham 2014; Derks 2014).

Another developmental stage commenced at about six to seven months when the baby began to teethe and supplementary foods were introduced to its diet (Pliny the Elder, Historia Naturalis 7.15; Soranus, Gynaecology 2.22.49). This weaning process was completed at about three years, as stable nitrogen and carbon isotope analysis of infant skeletal remains demonstrates (Katzenberg, Herring, and Saunders 1996; Dupras, Schwarcz, and Fairgrieve 2001). The age of one year marked another milestone in the life-course, at least in some social and judicial circumstances. Roman legal texts indicate that infants who had not yet reached their first birthday were not mourned if they died (Ulpian, FIRA 2.536); to this I will return. These sources also indicate that if a child of a person with Junian Latin status, i.e. limited citizen rights, completed its first year, it and its parents were eligible to receive full Roman citizenship (Gaius, Institutes 1.29; Ulpian, Digest 3.3)

The life-stages documented in literary sources, medical texts and correspondence can, also be seen to some extent in the visual arts, for example on so-called biographical marble sarcophagi from Rome and its environs which came into vogue with the middle and freedman (ex-slave) classes from the first half of the second century AD (Amedick 1991; Huskinson 1996; George 2000). They are decorated with vignettes of infancy and childhood life-stages, employing the visual imagery that reflects the commissioners' perceptions of the world of wealth and privilege. The parents of the child, as well as many other caregivers, such as wet-nurses, servants, teachers, and so on are included in these reliefs (Schulze 1998). George (2000: 197) rightly notes that these scenes highlight or allude to family wealth and commemorate the social position of the child and its parents.

On his sarcophagus of the mid-second century AD from Ostia near Rome, Marcus Cornelius Statius is depicted as a developing child, beginning with his infancy when he was one or two months old, at least partially wrapped in swaddling bands and being breastfed by his mother (Huskinson 1996: cat. no. 1.23, pl. II.1; Rawson 2003: 106-7, fig. 2.2) <(Fig. 3)>. Later, his father took the primary role in his son's upbringing, culminating with the boy's education and oratorical recitations. The invisibility of the mother in this panorama of childhood beyond infancy may correspond with the completion of the weaning phase.

On biographical sarcophagi, the baby's bath often is the first depicted step of socialisation. According to Soranus (Gynaecology 2.8.13), the newborn, as soon as it was born, should be cleansed of blood and afterbirth with a mixture of salt and honey or olive oil, then bathed with lukewarm water to wash away this emulsion. In the sarcophagus reliefs, the newborn is washed in a basin by nurses and other servants and transformed from a bloodied product of its mother's womb to an individual in its own right. Once cleansed, the baby is handed back by the nurse to the mother who sits nearby. This is surely what Plutarch (Letter of Consolation 6) was criticising when he singled out neglectful mothers who 'after others have cleansed and prettied up their children, receive them in their arms like pets'.

The other activity peculiar to infancy that is depicted on biographical sarcophagi is breastfeeding. Maternal breastfeeding was considered best (Juvenal, Satire 6.592-4), but this, and other manifestations of maternal care, were often only constructed ideals, especially as portrayed in literature and the reliefs on these sarcophagi. The sarcophagus portrayals of breastfeeding clearly show that the nurturing of the newborn involved women who were not the baby's mother (Carroll 2014). In fact, it is usually the nutrix who is entrusted with nursing the baby, and only very rarely is the mother depicted breastfeeding, as on a funerary portrait from the Danube (Boatwright 2005: 287-9, 317, fig. 10.1; Mander 2013: 98, cat. no. 733, fig. 82) <(Fig. 4)>. In reality, many, if not most, mothers outside elevated social circles probably will have breastfed and cared for their infants themselves.

Death and commemoration of infants

Already before birth, there were many potential dangers for the infant and its mother. The length of Soranus's discussion in Book 4 of Gynaecology on difficult deliveries implies that midwives could expect routinely to encounter complicated births. Archaeological evidence for miscarriages, still-births, and the death of mother and baby in childbirth survives in the burial evidence at many Roman sites. At the Kellis 2 cemetery in the Dakhleh Oasis in Roman Egypt, for example, the number of foetuses and neonates suggests that roughly 15 per cent of pregnancies did not reach full term (Marlow 2001; Tocheri et al. 2005; Cope and Dupras 2011). Latin epitaphs on Roman funerary monuments also record the death of mother

and infant due to complications in labour or as a consequence of childbirth (Gourévitch 1987; Laes 2011: 50-6; Carroll 2014). One, in particular, seems to blame the fetus for the death of the mother: 'The unstoppable Fury of the newborn infant took me, bitter, from my happy life with a fatal hemorrhage. I did not bring the child into the light by my labour pains, but it lies hidden in its mother's womb among the dead' (Kaibel 1878, 218).

Modern estimates place the mortality rate of children in the first year of life between 20-40 per cent (Hopkins 1966; 1983: 225; Golden 1988: 155; Garnsey 1991: 51-2). In Rome and peninsular Italy, Shaw (2000) was able to demonstrate a correlation between birthing cycles and infant mortality which indicates that many infants died already in the same month they were born. A lack of sunlight, contaminated water, and infections led to anaemia, rickets, and other illnesses, all of which contributed to high infant mortality (Fairgrieve and Molto 2000; Facchini, Rastelli, and Brasili 2004). Analysis of teeth from skeletons found in various cemeteries indicate that there were significant periods of stress affecting tooth growth in the first year of life which could be related to a change in diet and nutritional deficiencies during the weaning process (FitzGerald et al. 2006; Prowse et al. 2008; Redfern and Gowland 2012:125-7).

Plutarch (Letter of Consolation 11) claimed that the Romans 'do not bring libations to those of their children who die in infancy, nor do they observe in their case any of the other rites that the living are expected to perform for the dead, as such children have no part in earth or earthly things'. Comments such as these have been taken as evidence that 'deceased infants were often not even buried properly' (Krause 2011: 624) or that children dying in perinatal age were 'malign and taboo' (Shaw 2001: 99). If infants in life really were non-persons socially, they would be non-persons in death, yet burial evidence in Roman Italy, Gaul, and elsewhere reveals that infants and very young children were buried as part of their communities, whether, for example, in the communal cemetery or within the grounds of rural settlements (Duday, Laubenheimer, and Tillier 1995; Hölschen 2002; Blaizot, Alix, and Ferber 2003; Laubenheimer 2004; Carroll 2011; 2012).

Sometimes, the number of excavated newborns and infants under the age of one year corresponds quite closely to the estimated mortality rate of 20-40 per cent, including Argenton in France with 26 per cent (Allain, Fauduet, and Tuffreau-Libre 1992), Velia in south-east Italy with 31 per cent (Craig 2009), Kellis in Egypt with 34.6 per cent (Wheeler et al. 2011: 114), and Sétif in Algeria with 39 per cent (Février and Guéry 1980). Usually, however, there are far fewer infants attested in cemeteries, for various possible reasons, including taphonomic processes, lack of awareness by earlier excavators, and so on (Carroll 2011: 108-11; Redfern and Gowland 2012: 113-14). Infanticide, the killing of unwanted or sick newborns, occasionally has been proposed as a factor in the under-representation of infants in the burial record or as a reason for the often low numbers of infant burials in relation to the true infant mortality rate (Smith and Kahila 1992; Mays 1993). However, it cannot be measured how widely infanticide might have been practiced in the Roman world, and a nuanced approach to understanding and interpreting the archaeological evidence for perinatal and neonatal burials outside the normal cemetery or domestic contexts is of crucial importance (Gowland, Chamberlain, and Redfern 2014).

Although Pliny the Elder (Historia Naturalis 7.15) claimed that 'it is the universal custom of mankind not to cremate a person who dies before cutting his teeth' at six-seven months of age, this can be doubted, as at many cemetery sites, including Pompeii (van Andringa et al.

2013: 322-9, 527-8, figs.225c-f, 293u-w), this age as the point of transition between inhumation and cremation was not strictly observed.

Infants were buried in wooden coffins, tile cists, amphorae, and shrouds; they were given grave-goods appropriate to their age; and in cemeteries they were buried often in close association with other family members (Carroll 2011: 105-8). With the wealth of archaeological evidence available to us, we can seriously question the veracity of Plutarch's statement that parents of dead infants and young children did not make an effort 'at the laying out of the dead' (Letter of Consolation 11). A burial of a child ten to eleven months old at Arrington Bridge, for example, was wrapped in woollen textiles dyed with madder and indigo and buried in a costly lead sarcophagus (Taylor 1993: 203-4). At Kellis in Egypt, the family of an infant went to the expense of spreading crushed myrrh resin on its skull, placing larger resin droplets of this valuable commodity about the body and between the layers of the linen wrappings (Wheeler et al. 2011: 114). Such circumstances point to an investment in the burial of infants and an emotional engagement of the family with them.

It is rather unfortunate that Roman written sources have influenced negatively our understanding of Roman society's reaction to infant death. The jurist Ulpian (FIRA 2.536) wrote that 'children younger than three are not formally mourned, but are mourned in marginal form; a child less than a year receives neither formal mourning nor marginal mourning'. Elsewhere we learn that 'minors up to the age of three years should be mourned for one month for each year of their age at the time of their death' (Paulus, Opinions 1.21.13). In other words, a one-year-old child would be mourned for a month, but for infants who had not yet lived a year there was no mourning period according to law. Here the relationship between literature and archaeology proves to be of vital importance in understanding the discrepancies between **public** displays of mourning, which may be what Ulpian and Plutarch refer to, and **private** expressions of grief that are recognisable in funerary customs and burial assemblages (Rawson 2003a: 281; Baltussen 2009). Regulations on mourning, and criticism of displays of grief, relate to the public sphere, not necessarily to sentiments expressed or activities conducted in private. Despite his recommended restraint in the face the death of a child, Cicero, as a man of elite status, was publicly inconsolable, to the worry of his friends, when his thirty-two-year-old daughter Tullia died in 45 BC from the complications of childbirth and left him with a 'deep wound' (Letters to Friends 4.6; Treggiari 2007: 136-42). In the end, therefore, the written sources must be seen to portray a world of privilege and conformity according to status and associated social expectations. They give us no real insight into the emotional engagement of the elite with their infants, nor do they help us to judge how the less advantaged engaged with their infants or coped with their premature death.

Funerary monuments commemorating infants under the age of one year appear, in modest numbers, across the Roman world, and they offer us another avenue of enquiry. Most often, they simply record the basic data, such as the name of the child and age at death, as well as the name(s) of the commemorator(s) and the familial context, but others preserve a poem or a few lines expressing grief and a sense of loss (Baills 2003; Laes 2004; 2007). The commissioning of monuments in general was a financial investment that was beyond the possibilities of the poor, but not necessarily of working Romans with a regular income (Duncan-Jones 1974: 171-84, 207; Saller and Shaw 1984: 127-8). Making this effort for a baby only days, weeks or months old demonstrates the family's desire to preserve the memory of a loved child. The recorded age at death of an infant is often very specific,

including months, days, and hours, preserving visibly and painfully the memory of a very short life. The young Lucius Valerius, for example, died in Rome at the age of seventy-one days, having been born in the night in the sixth hour and dying during the night in the sixth hour (CIL VI.28044/ILS 8191). As Laes (2007: 32) asserts, the 'accurate indication of age served almost as a petrified utterance of grief and mourning'. There are even extremely young babies who died before their dies lustricus, but who, nevertheless, are named on their funerary monument (Laes 2014).

In the poems and laments preserved in longer funerary inscriptions for infants, there often is a sense of injustice at life being cut so short; the blame sometimes is also attributed to fate or the gods. The sense of being cheated comes across in the Latin and Greek epitaphs of six-month-old Iulianus from Merida in Spain who 'was not permitted to live beyond seven months' (CIL II.562/IG XIV.2541). His parents set up his gravestone, 'much lamenting for the loss of a small child' (Edmondson, Nogales Basarrate, and Trillmich 2001: 139-41). Lamentations are the order of the day also for the parents of a six-month-old baby girl in Mainz: 'Oh, had you never been born, when you were to become so loved, and yet it was determined at your birth that you would shortly be taken from us, much to your parents' pain…. The rose bloomed and soon wilted' (CIL XIII.7133; Carroll 2006: 169-70, 198, fig. 57; Mander 2013: 29-30, cat. no. 453, fig. 13).

Funerary monuments for infants sometimes are elaborate enough to possess an image of the infant, in addition to the inscribed text. Babies can be depicted in the swaddling clothes they wore during the first forty to sixty days of their brief lives, and they also appear in various forms of clothing or even in divine guise (Deyts 2004; Carroll 2012a) <(Fig. 5)>. Two little boys, one a slave, one a free-born child, are shown on an altar of the second century AD in Rome; yet, while Nico was eleven months old, Eutyches almost a year and a half, both boys look older than this, indeed, the same age, possibly a couple of years old (Rawson 2003a: 286-8, fig. 2; Mander 2013: 107, cat. no. 73, fig. 92). They both wear the toga praetexta, the garment a young Roman citizen was entitled to wear, even though Eutyches had no right as a slave to do so. The mother, Publicia Glypte, may have had this altar specially commissioned, choosing images intentionally to 'improve' reality for him. But it may have been a memorial chosen off the shelf, although this implies that the stonemason from whom it was purchased would have anticipated the death of two little (older) boys somewhere in Rome and the existence of a family who wanted to commemorate them. Despite high infant mortality, there is no indication that standard or ready-made memorials for babies and infants were available. Whatever stone was chosen to commemorate a beloved infant, the act of choosing and investing in a permanent memorial was significant, and it is this that makes these monuments so special.

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Fig. 1 Reconstruction of a baby wearing a necklace strung with apotropaic amulets, based on artefacts from infant burials. Drawing by I. De Luis

Fig. 2 Terracotta votive of a swaddled infant wearing an apotropaic necklace, from Bomarzo. Photo by E.-J. Graham, with permission of the Museo Civico di Viterbo.

Fig. 3 Scenes of infancy and childhood on the marble sarcophagus of M. Cornelius Statius from Ostia. Drawing by J. Willmott.

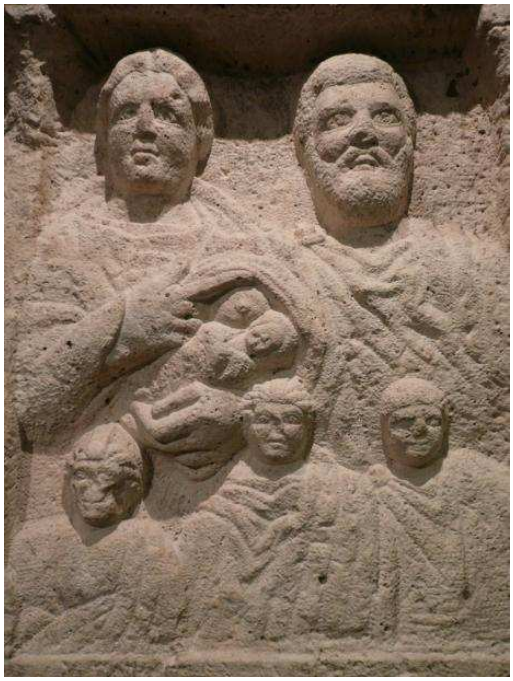

Fig. 4 Gravestone of a mother breastfeeding her infant in the company of her husband and other children, from Dunaújváros. Photo by author, with permission of the Hungarian National Museum.

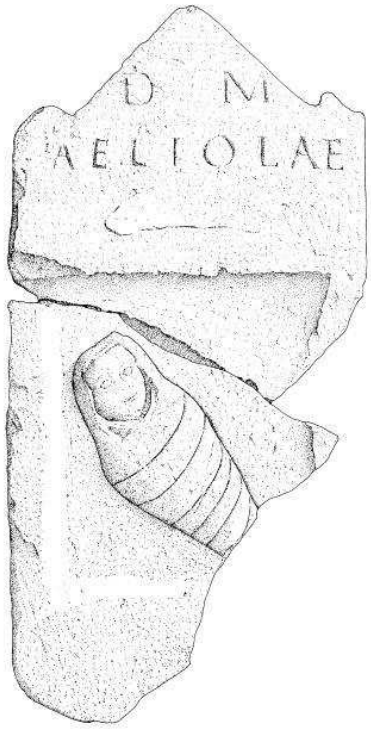

Fig. 5 Gravestone of the infant Aeliola wrapped in swaddling bands, from Metz. Drawing by J. Willmott.