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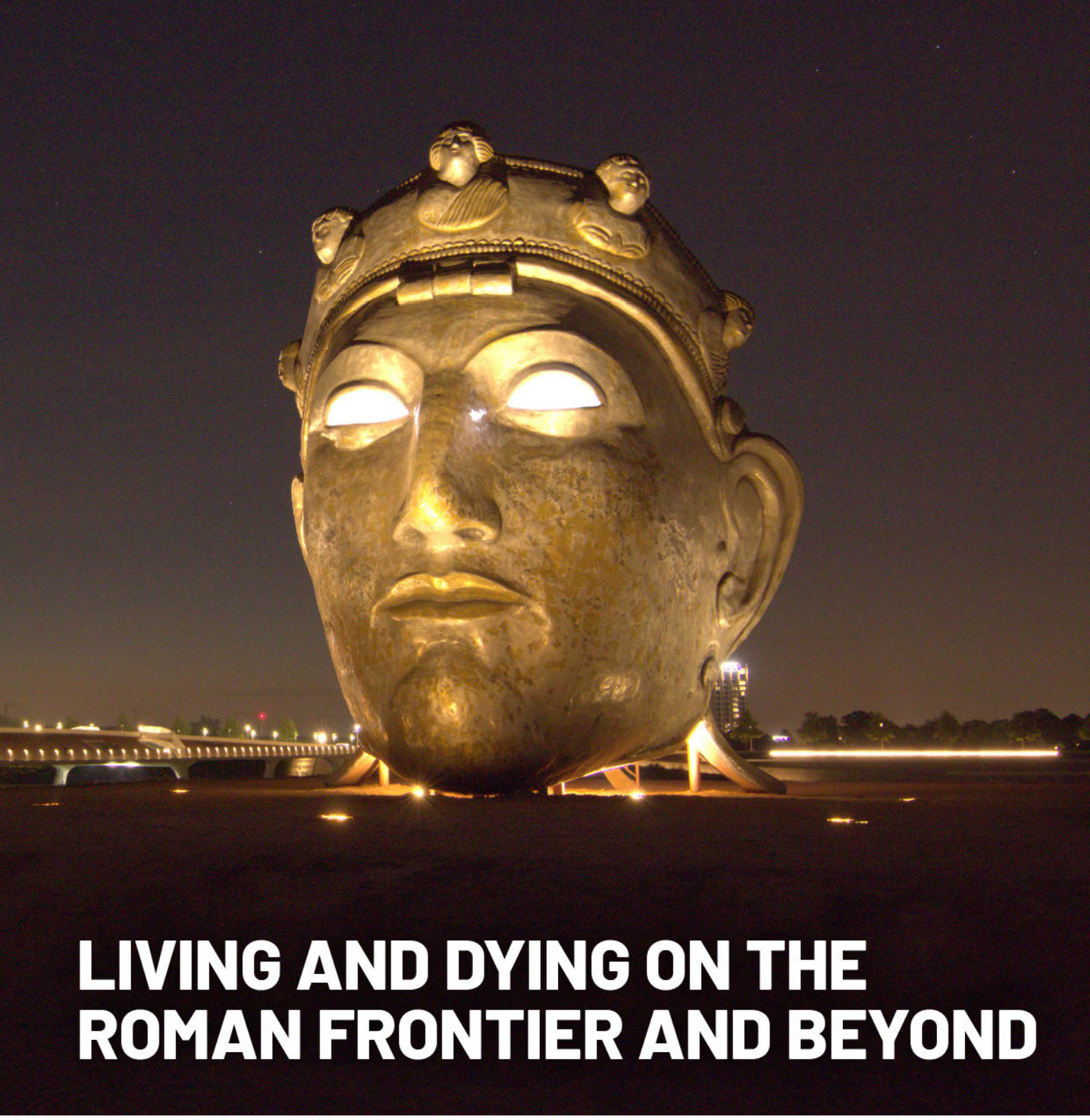

LIVING AND DYING ON THE ROMAN FRONTIER AND BEYOND

HARRY **VAN ENCKEVORT**, MARK **DRIESSEN**, ERIK **GRAAFSTAL**,
TOM **HAZENBERG**, TATIANA **IVLEVA** AND CAROL **VAN DRIEL-MURRAY** (EDS)

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Children's lives remembered on Rome's northern frontiers

Maureen Carroll

Recent research on aspects of childhood in the Roman world has helped reshape the study of children in antiquity. It has done this by advocating interdisciplinarity to counterbalance earlier, predominantly text-based, approaches to the topic and by refuting the common notion that children were marginal to society (Rawson 2003; Laes 2011; Mander 2013; Laes & Vuolanto 2017; Parkin & Evans Grubbs 2018; Carroll 2018). These studies have made significant advances in understanding how children's experiences differed according to their location, time, gender, and social context. Yet, one important context in which there are serious gaps in study is that of military communities and families on the frontiers in any part of the Empire. Children growing up in a potentially dangerous location dominated by soldiers and combative professionals, who were accompanied by women and families to varying degrees, may have had their lives impacted and managed in very different ways than in a purely civilian milieu in Rome, Italy, or other places distant from the frontier zones.

It is unknown how many children might have been born and raised in Roman forts, although there is archaeological and textual evidence for the existence of women and children in these contexts. This includes writing tablets from *Vindonissa* (Speidel 1996, 180-190, letters 41-45) containing correspondence with women who were running businesses and operating within the fort, the burials of newborns in the vicinity of officers' quarters at *Vindonissa* (Trumm & Fellmann Brogli 2008), and children's shoes and other female- and child-related artefacts in soldiers' barracks at *Vindolanda* and Ellingen (Van Driel-Murray 1994; Allison 2006; 2011; Stoll 2006, 262-286; Greene 2014; Allason-Jones, Van Driel-Murray & Greene 2020). And there can be little doubt that children were part of the communities of civilian dependents of soldiers in the *vici* and towns on the frontiers. Many sons of soldiers and army veterans there continued in the career path of their father, and daughters might grow up to marry soldiers and have children of their own. Children also moved around with their military families, as the discharge diploma of the Batavian M. Ulpius Fronto of *Cohors I Batavorum* naming his Batavian wife and three daughters indicates (Van Driel-Murray 2012, 115-116). His unit was stationed in AD 113 in *Pannonia superior* when he was discharged, although the family then must have moved to the civilian settlement near the fort at Regensburg in *Raetia* where the diploma was found (Derks 2009, 248-249; Roselaar 2016, 154-155).

In this paper, I focus on funerary commemoration on the northern frontiers for the information it conveys about children and families. Commemoration of children acted, among other things, as a devise for families to cope with 'unfinished lives' due

Maureen Carroll
University of York
maureen.carroll@york.ac.uk

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to premature death. A particular goal here is to explore how texts and images on monuments from these locations, with supporting artefactual evidence, reflect gendered roles and futures for the children of military families and associated groups on the frontiers.

Gendered lives in funerary commemoration and material culture

The funerary commemoration of Roman children suggests that, from a very tender age, they were invested with identities and a personhood of various kinds. In many cases, the attention paid to the dead child and the way it was remembered appears to have offered some compensation for a life cut short (Mander 2013, 61-62; Carroll 2018, 243-249). The material culture associated with the burials of children also projected some future qualities that could have been developed had they lived longer and fulfilled their family's hopes. A study of the archaeological, epigraphic, and material evidence from civilian contexts shows that a child's prospects and role in society were important and that people were keen to see them realised. A few examples of this phenomenon in the centre of the Empire provide contextual background against which to examine the evidence from the northern frontiers.

With a funerary monument of the late 1st century BC or the early 1st century AD from Rome, freedmen parents commemorated themselves and their freeborn citizen son (Kockel 1993, 196-197, cat. no. M1, plates 111a and 112a; Carroll 2018, 235, fig. 8.13). The male child takes centre stage, dressed in a toga and wearing a *bulla* as visible symbols of Roman male citizenship (and free birth). This family of former slaves communicates their expectations of their prodigy, with future hopes for upward social mobility for themselves and a public career and role as head of a free-born family for him. Although his early death interrupted those prospects, the family's respectability and legitimacy is nonetheless expressed through this constructed image of their son, hinting at what could have been. The sarcophagus of M. Cornelius Statius from *Ostia* (fig. 1) depicts various stages of the boy's infancy and childhood and his gendered socialisation (Huskinson 1996, 11, cat. no. I.23, plate 2.1; Carroll 2018, 133-134, fig. 4.6). This young orator and scholar in the making left the care of his mother as an infant to be raised and educated from toddler age by his father and male teachers for a future life of public service and leadership. As Huskinson (2007, 333) points out, the vignettes of infancy, play, education, and death seen on various children's sarcophagi "were deployed as equivalents to the defining moments in the biography of the Roman adult", in particular, the ideal male adult of elite status. Q. Sulpicius Maximus, whose funerary monument in Rome reveals that he died from exhaustion from his studies as a prize-winning poet before his twelfth birthday in AD 94, is depicted as an older individual in a pose of recitation, holding a scroll on which his Greek verses are written (Huskinson 2007, 329-330, fig. 17.3; Mander 2013, 59, cat. no. 50, fig. 130; Garulli 2018). Thus, the image of a learned scholar and orator was chosen for him, a role he did not experience fully in his brief life.

Although boys were trained for public roles, girls had a social role to play as well, albeit a private and domestic one: that of wife and *matrona*. Marriage was crucial in the construction of female identity, and profound sadness was felt, according to Juvenal (*Saturae* 15.138-141), when a virgin died before her wedding day. The image of the respectable *matrona*, clad modestly in a long tunic and *palla*, was a popular symbol of virtuous marital status. In funerary commemoration in Rome, the beauty, femininity and education of girls are highlighted, as these shaped them into worthy wives who could properly rear their children (George 2015, 1049). The carved lid of a sarcophagus in Malibu depicts just such a pretty, ornately

Figure 1. Sarcophagus of M. Cornelius Statius depicting stages of his life-course, early 2nd century AD (J. Willmott, copyright M. Carroll).

Figure 2. Funerary monument of Aurelius Secundianus and his parents, 3rd century AD, from Celje (O. Harl, courtesy of the Pokrajinski Muzej, Celje).

coiffed young girl with her pet dog and dolls (Koch 1988, 11-13; Wrede 1990). Dolls also are found in the graves of girls, primarily, but not only, in Italy (Martin Kilcher 2001; Harlow 2012; Newby 2019). Dolls gave girls a model for their own femininity and adulthood, but they were laid aside and dedicated when a girl reached marriageable age or before her wedding (Dolansky 2012). When placed in the graves of young girls, we may presume that this stage in the life course disappointingly had not been reached or the individual died unmarried (Hersch 2010, 65-68). Also, girls might have played with miniature furniture, serving dishes, and braziers made of lead or tin in imitative learning to prepare them for their future roles as homemakers. When they reached the age of marriage, these objects were dedicated, as in the sanctuary of Jupiter Anxur at Terracina (Barbera 1991; Darani 2021, 127-130, 142-143, figs 4 and 8), or they were buried, as a kind of miniature trousseau, with girls who had not yet moved on to the real household items as wives, as in the case of the fifteen-year-old Julia Graphis in Brescello (Darani 2021). Death could intervene and hinder the fulfilment of the ideal roles of these girls, and the reference to such things in the context of burial underscores the poignancy of the loss of a life already planned out according to social and gendered norms.

Gendered futures of frontier children

An impressive corpus of funerary monuments with texts and images survives from the northern militarised zones of the Empire, and particularly from the provinces of *Pannonia* and *Noricum*, where, in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD family monuments became popular (Boatwright 2005; Carroll 2015). These stones afforded parents the means to project some future and unfulfilled qualities of children and to compensate for the untimely death of their offspring.

One such family grave monument in which gendered behaviour and public and private roles are displayed

Figure 3. Funerary monument of the four-year-old Vitalinus, late 2nd-early 3rd century AD, (M. Carroll, by permission of the Aquincum Museum).

is from Flavia Solva in *Noricum*, dating to the late 2nd or early 3rd century AD (Mander 2013, 88-89, cat. no. 504, fig. 68). On this relief, the son as a young man is depicted in a public role as a Roman soldier, dressed in a tunic and *sagum* which, by this time, was part of the military uniform (Rothe 2012, 159-165; Hainzmann 2015). His father, also in a public, but civilian, role appears in the toga, probably indicating his status as a veteran soldier who had been granted Roman citizen status upon honourable discharge. The mother, however, assumes a gendered role appropriate to the traditions of women of local non-Roman population groups on the Norican and Pannonian frontiers, being clothed in the female dress of the middle Danube as a visible marker of the ethnic and cultural identity of her family and clan (Rothe 2012).

Aurelius Secundianus, a much younger boy who died at only seven in the late 3rd century in Celje in Slovenia, is depicted in his family's funerary portrait (fig. 2) already in soldierly apparel in tunic and *sagum*, like his father, Aurelius Secundinus (Rothe 2012, 195, fig. 46; Mander 2013, 267, cat. no. 497). He is shown using a stylus to write on a tablet, so we are led to believe here that he could read and write at this young age. Thus, this boy is portrayed as if he really were a soldier with skills that a much older male serving in the army would possess. Especially relevant is a funerary monument of the late second or early 3rd century

from *Aquincum* (fig. 3) in which the mere four-year-old Vitalus (or Vitalinus) is depicted as a soldier with a tunic, *sagum*, and broad military belt, just like his father, a *cornicen* of *Legio II*, who died in battle (Mander 2013, 99, cat. no. 678, fig. 84).

These examples, and many more, demonstrate that a projected military identity for boys is typical of commemorative monuments of the second and third centuries on the northern borders, particularly in *Noricum* and *Pannonia*. That is not to say that all boys joined the army when they grew up there, but a review of the funerary monuments makes it clear that many of them did and each family had many soldiers in them. Thus, we can see on funerary reliefs of the 3rd century, two, three or four adults and two or three children depicted, the men of varying ages all wearing the tunic and *sagum* and the male children doing so too (Mander 2013, 108, cat. no. 623, fig. 93, 300-301, cat. no. 671 and 302, cat. no. 679; 108). Military service passed on to the next generation was as prevalent for auxiliary troops as for legionary soldiers, but boys and young men whose fathers had not been soldiers also chose this career route. Two sons who had served in *Cohors I Asturum* and in *Legio II* and *Legio VI Ferrata* respectively, for example, are named in AD 183-185 in a funerary inscription in *Aquincum* (Óbuda) that commemorates their father, a man with no apparent military connections (Mander 2013, 300, cat. no. 670).

Commemorated girls and women on the frontiers expressed less overtly gendered identities than boys and men, often being depicted as individuals with vaguely feminine and status-related attributes, such as flowers, fruit, wreaths, or jewellery boxes. The contrast between boys and girls here is clear on a relief of the early 3rd century from Pécs (Mander 2013, 316, cat. no. 748). Two adult sons of Caesernia Firmilla and Marcius Lucidianus are named as soldiers and are shown in tunic and *sagum*, along with the wife of one of them; in the foreground their six-year-old grandson, Marcius Iulianus, also wears the tunic and *sagum* and writes on a tablet, whereas the granddaughter, Lucia, is noticeable only for her jewellery and her pet bird.

A closer examination of funerary monuments, however, reveals that girls and women certainly did express their gendered identities and ethnicity through dress (Carroll 2013c). The continuity of ethnic identity is secured through the female family line, and it is passed down from grandmother to daughter to granddaughter, as is apparent on the 2nd-century monument of Batta from *Aquincum* on which three generations of women wear Pannonian (Eraviscan) dress with slight variations (Harl 1993, 17, cat. no. 35; Rothe 2012, 183, fig. 33). This can be seen also on a 2nd-century funerary monument (fig. 4) from the same site for Brogimara, wife of Magio, and Iantuna, her two-year-old daughter (Nagy 2012,

Figure 4. Funerary monument of Brogimara and two-year-old Iantuna from Gellért Hill (*Aquincum*) (M. Carroll, by permission of the Hungarian National Museum).

36, cat. no. 20; Mander 2013, 91, cat. no. 691, fig. 77). The mother wears Eraviscan female dress, including *torques* and arm bands, and so does the daughter. The girl, however, has her hair tied back and does not wear the headdress her mother does. This is a typical visual distinction between young girls and married women in other regions, such as around Cologne where the Germanic *Ubii* resided (Carroll 2013b). Brogimara and Iantuna are freeborn but do not have Roman citizen status; it is their Eraviscan identity that is highlighted in nomenclature and attire. It may be, therefore, that for such frontier women, being Roman – however we define that – was less important than being part of a legitimate family and a member of an ethnic group rooted in a

Figure 5. Funerary monument of a Treveran family from Selzen, mid-1st century AD. The daughter on the right holds a spindle and distaff (after Boppert 1992).

community and audience of peers and others of the same origin.

Gendered futures for girls are apparent also in the inclusion in their graves of spindles and distaffs used for spinning wool, one of the main domestic tasks of Roman women, at least ideologically (Larsson Lovén 2007). Plinius the Elder (*Historia Naturalis* 8.194 and 28.29) wrote that it was customary, in Italy at least, for a distaff with rovings of wool and a spindle with thread to accompany the bride on her wedding day, as if she was arriving ready to take on the task of spinning wool for the family's clothing (Hersch 2010, 162-164). Women occasionally were buried with their wool-working equipment, as in the late 2nd-century grave of a woman at *Viminacium* (Danković 2019). Although women in Italy are not depicted visually with spinning equipment, outside of Italy they appear in funerary portraits with a spindle and distaff or a basket of wool, as, for example, on a marble sarcophagus of a pregnant woman from *Ephesos* (spinning equipment was also inside the sarcophagus) or the monument of the British woman Regina from South Shields at the eastern end of Hadrian's Wall (Trinkl 1994; Carroll 2013a).

Learning to spin wool began early in preparation for the role of a *matrona*, as the placement of a spindle, a distaff loaded with wool, and spindle whorls in the 2nd-century burial of a possibly six-year-old girl at Martres-de-Veyre in the Auvergne suggests (Audollent 1923, 290, 305-306, plate 7). Whether or not this girl really knew how

to spin at this tender age, the spinning equipment given to her reflects symbolically the gendered role she was to fulfil had she become a wife. A mid-1st-century funerary monument of a family from Selzen (near Mainz) on the Rhine frontier also reveals the preparation of girls for adult social roles. On the reliefs are a local man and his two daughters (fig. 5), one of whom clearly wears female Treveran dress (Boppert 1992, 59-60, cat. no. 3, plate 8). The inscription is missing. Both female figures are much smaller than the man, even though he is seated, and therefore I disagree with Boppert (1992, 48-53, cat. no. 1, plate 2) that they represent a wife and a daughter. On contemporary funerary monuments in the region, married couples normally are shown the same size and seated together. An exception is an early 1st-century funerary monument from Mainz-Weisenau which shows the man seated and the wife standing, but she is the correct size for a standing adult and towers over him. Both females on the Selzen relief are far more likely to be daughters.

The attire is best known from the contemporaneous monument of Menimane who is clothed in the multiple layered garments, bonnet, and metal dress accessories of the region (Boppert 1992, 53-59, cat. no. 2, plate 6; Böhme-Schönberger 1995; a version of it is worn also by a long-haired girl on an early 1st-century AD stele in Mainz (Boppert 1992, 69-71, cat. no. 12, plate 16). Like Menimane, who was a wife and mother, and the girl from Mainz, the taller of the daughters on the family relief from Selzen holds a spindle and a distaff with rovings of wool on it, suggesting that she has the relevant domestic skills and is on her way towards fulfilling her social role as an ideal wife to a future husband.

Conclusion

Different cultural, social, and regional factors played a role in building relationships with the youngest members of society, and they governed expectations for children's futures and roles in life. A recurring theme in Roman funerary commemoration of the young is the sense of a child having been robbed of a future by premature death, and this is apparent also in the material culture in their graves.

In Rome and in other areas away from the limes zones, civilian identities are more likely to be expressed for children. Here, boys of the elite or of the aspirational middle and freedman classes appear as public orators and statesmen in training, not as soldiers, and girls are portrayed as wives and heads of households, clothed in Roman dress in accordance with social and cultural norms. On the northern frontiers, on the other hand, images were used in the commemoration of children to reflect the reality experienced by families in ways relevant to them and specific to life in the presence of large contingents of military personnel on the edge of the Empire, especially in the second and third centuries AD. Thus, very often in these regions, young boys were portrayed as future soldiers, perhaps destined to follow in the career footsteps of their fathers and other male relatives, rather than as togate orators. Equally, young girls of indigenous population groups here could be marked out as future wool-working homemakers and sartorial guardians of the family's ethnic identity carried on through the maternal line.

Children who died young were perceived as persons they could have become. This is true of both civilian and military children, but the evidence discussed here demonstrates that there were clear differences in the gendered futures projected for children growing up in these contexts.

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