

Children and meaningful life in the Roman Empire

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In the Greco-Roman culture, the sense of continuity and immortality was commonly shared and often the most important aspiration in an individual's course of life. The aim of my presentation is to show the many ways in which children were seen to contribute to this desire to give life its proper meaning during the Roman Empire.

Striving for continuity started with every-day survival but was focused on achieving a sense of continuity in face of inevitable physical death. The great significance of children to their parents and the elder kin was due to the fact that in the ancient world there were hardly any other means of securing continuity. Quite practically, children were the only assurance for their parents' old age sustenance, the highest elites excluded. Similarly, children were in charge of their burial and after-life wellbeing.

It was also children's duty to secure the continuity of their parents' honour and name, and keep up their remembrance. This was a central aspect especially in the Roman culture: one's life continued in one's children, in the names used by younger relatives, and in commemoration. Even within the

Christian culture of late Antiquity this remained a central feature in achieving a sense of continuity, though the idea of transcendental immortality gradually gained more and more ground.

In the pre-modern world it was also of vital importance to keep the inheritance, and especially the landed property, in the possession of the family. Moreover, children continued the non-material traditions, especially the religious practices, of the family. The Roman sources repeatedly suggest that children symbolised the presence of their parents even after their death. Children resembled their parents in their physical appearance or by their behaviour, or they simply carried their parents' personal qualities in their blood – nowadays we would refer to the continuity of the genes.

In different cultural and social contexts, different modes of aiming at continuity become dominant. Analysing Roman discussions and perceptions will help us to see, in our own society, the features which have evolved in response to yearning for meaningful life and securing continuity, in the face of hopelessness and death.