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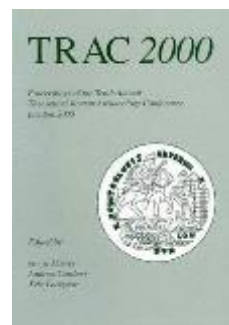
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Author: Eleanor Scott

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Unpicking a Myth: the infanticide of female and disabled infants in antiquity

Eleanor Scott

King Alfred's University College, Winchester

12.1 Introduction

This narrative is painted with broad brush strokes — moving at times outside of the Roman world and into other contexts of the human past — but it is not the intention of this paper to generalise. Indeed, it is generalisations that this paper wishes to question, notably the assumptions that exist in abundance about the infants who were the victims of infanticide in the ancient world, it being widely held that they fall into three categories: they are either illegitimate, or female, or ‘handicapped’.

Archaeologists’ assumptions about infanticide have, unsurprisingly, been predicated on historically specific and socially constructed belief systems. When Hambleton Romano-British villa was first excavated, for example, and the remains of 97 infants found buried there, the original excavator believed that these infants were the unwanted and concealed bastards of domestic servants, disposed of at birth, in the dead of night (Heneage Cocks 1921). This view, however, now sits uncomfortably with modern archaeologists, recalling as it does the collective concern with illegitimacy which so afflicted the Victorians and Edwardians, especially where the lower social orders were concerned. Two generations later, the explanation of the Hambleton infant burials offered by one of the greatest scholars of Roman Britain was that they represented ‘the exposure of the unwanted female offspring of a slave-run establishment’ (Frere 1978, pp. 303–4). But Frere was simply tapping into the zeitgeist, and the idea of the almost routine disposal of unvalued or unwanted female infants — preferential female infanticide — was to prove very influential in archaeological and historical narratives of infanticide.

More recent texts on infanticide continue to refer to illegitimacy and femaleness (*e.g.*, Mays 2000, pp. 180, 182–3), but a new causal factor is cited with increasing frequency. Thus, while Molleson has written of Roman Europe that infanticide involved the deaths of many illegitimate and female infants (Molleson 1999, pp. 74–6), she focused on the disposal of the disabled. For example, she asserts:

Given the prevalence of infanticide in the past it would seem to be highly probable that any newly born child seen to have a malformation would not have been allowed to live. It seems certain that the exposure of deformed, sickly and illegitimate children was not uncommon in the Europe of antiquity.

(Molleson 1999, p. 74)

The paradigms used to explain what makes infants ‘unwanted’ or ‘unvalued’ in the first place tend to change from generation to generation; and in the past 80 years we have seen a shift in explanatory focus from illegitimacy to femaleness to disability.

Even leaving aside the thorny problem of whether the evidence of infant remains in the countryside of Roman Britain even represents widespread infanticide at all,¹ it is necessary to question whether infanticide in the Roman world was really the story of the killing of the female or the killing of the disabled.²

12.2 Preferential female infanticide: fact or fiction?

The frequently expressed opinion that female infanticide was routinely and commonly practised in prehistory and antiquity (*e.g.*, McLennan 1865 cited in Reynolds & Tanner 1983; Birdsell 1968; Ehrenberg 1989; Hoffer & Hull 1984) is such an important assumption, with such crucial implications about how we view ancient societies, that it surely merits closer examination. First, we need to understand the origins of the assumption. It is important to be aware that the idea that female infanticide was normal practice in the past derives especially from one particular historical context — the ancient history of Greek and Roman texts. In a number of these texts the female infant is apparently devalued to the extent of being expendable. For example, in the famous papyrus from Roman Egypt, a man writes to his pregnant wife: 'If you have the baby before I return, if it is a boy, let it live; if it is a girl, expose it' (Oxyrhynchus Papyri 744, (Select Papyri 105); trans. Shelton 1988).

The few texts which survive from the classical Mediterranean have had an almost overwhelming influence. To argue from this historically specific evidence to a notion of global female infanticide in the human past is fraught with risks. Further, considering that the social and demographic implications of believing in widespread preferential female infanticide are vast, there has been precious little examination of these beliefs. Just what social and economic systems cause the female infant to be so devalued in the first place, where this does occur? Or, is the presumption of female infanticide actually a modern construct which has been projected back onto the past?

Firm evidence, for example, that female infanticide was practised in Palaeolithic Europe, is decidedly lacking, yet this time and place is often cited as a context where female babies were snuffed out to control population growth (*e.g.*, Ehrenberg 1989). The evidence for female infanticide in this period is virtually all circumstantial and lodged in a processual systems paradigm (*e.g.*, Divale 1972), and even the ethnographic evidence is ambiguous and unconvincing. Lee, for example, in his well-known study of the !Kung, is actually rather reticent about instances of infanticide amongst !Kung women when discussing methods of birth-spacing; most of attention focuses on extended breastfeeding and suppression of ovulation (*e.g.*, Lee 1980).

Indeed, it is possible to present a substantial amount of evidence for the practice of preferential male infanticide which is of as good (or even better) quality than the supposed evidence for female infanticide. For example, the Bronze Age cemetery at Mokrin, Roman Ashkelon in modern Israel, and the Phoenician city of Carthage, in North Africa, all provide potential contexts for male infanticide.

¹Mays (1993) argues for infanticide in the Romano-British countryside; but see Gowland this volume.

²Refutations of the view that infant burials in Romano-British (and indeed other) contexts represent the end product of the shame of illegitimacy have been presented elsewhere in detail (Scott 1991; Scott 1999, pp. 66–80, 109–23).

Mokrin

Despite relating to a context far removed from the Roman period, the study of the Early Bronze Age cemetery at Mokrin (to the north of Belgrade in the former Yugoslavia) nevertheless raises important methodological and interpretative issues of which are relevant to all of archaeology's period studies, including Roman archaeology. These issues revolve around the mortality profile of the cemetery, and how we interpret apparent demographic anomalies.

The mortality profile at Mokrin suggests that we are seeing a normal population represented in the cemetery, with two significant exceptions: there is an absence of neonatal infants in the cemetery, and there are more female children than male (Rega 1997).³ The absence of neonates in the cemetery is a phenomenon common to many societies in the past, and, fascinating though it is, it isn't the subject of this paper (but see Scott 1999, pp. 90 ff., for full discussion). It is the disparity between the numbers of female and male children which is interesting here. It is significant that this can best be accounted for if there were, simply, more female members of the child population. Beth Rega thinks that this excess of female children in the cemetery may be due to the fact that there were greater numbers of female than male children actually alive in this society and that, therefore, the pool of those dying was larger. Assuming approximately equal numbers of male and female babies were born, mortality, therefore, must have been significantly greater for boys during the neonatal period.

Rega suggests a number of reasons for this possible case of preferential male infanticide — or neglect — including the idea, drawn from ethnographic parallels, that the female was highly valued in adult society and thus better cared for in infancy and childhood than the male. In Jamaica, for example, favouritism is shown toward female children. Women have the greater rôle of economic providers, and they are crucial to the maintenance of family stability in matrilineal society. As a result, the higher value of a daughter to the family in general and to the mother in particular is clear. But females are carriers of such value only where the prevailing social system actually allows it. If tradition dictates that females will carry their wealth with them through their lives, for distribution within their own biological family, then they are highly valued, for the fruits of their labours will remain their own and will have a beneficial effect on their biological family. Thus, in societies where, say, bride-wealth is practised, one sees preferential treatment of girls in poor families (Rega 1997). Conversely, in Greek and Roman society, and in modern China and India, where female infanticide is known, women did not, and do not, carry wealth with them throughout their lives, with dowry systems and other mechanisms operating to transmit the woman's wealth to the family into which she marries (Scott 1999, pp. 66–80).

Phoenician sacrifice

The Phoenician practice of infant sacrifice exemplifies how infanticide could be designed to fill a logical rôle within a community. Infant sacrifice is a form of infanticide, but it is a public performance of beliefs or vows, usually practised as part of a perceived religious obligation (Lee 1994). The remains of sacrificed infants have been found in a number of Phoenician cities of the first millennium BC, such as Carthage in North Africa. This context too may perhaps be a story of the killing of the infant

³Note, however, that the infants from Mokrin were sexed using criteria, such as associated artefacts and grave orientation, which were found to be reliable indicators of sex for adult burials.

male. Shelby Brown notes that where the victims are described, they are usually said to be one or more of the following: young, male, rich (*i.e.*, freeborn and noble), and the dedicant's own infant or child, or poor and an infant sold to the dedicant. There are also occasional mentions of the infant being the first-born male or the best-loved, and of being sacrificed singly and in huge numbers, in times of personal crisis and in times of war. The infants were aged between 0–4 years, and they were burnt, possibly whilst drugged or already dead, and their remains collected and placed in cinerary urns along with small trinkets or pottery provided by the parents (Brown 1991; Lee 1994). The parents were careful to add their names and genealogies to the markers in order to announce publicly that they had fulfilled their vow to the gods. The infants, then, were buried for the gods beneath the names of their ancestors.

Roman Ashkelon

The picture from the Roman world, while not at all clear, is also beginning to be suggestive of male infanticide in some contexts. In 1992 Smith and Kahila reported on a large collection of infant bones from a late Roman sewer context at Ashkelon in Israel. They suggested that death was caused by infanticide on the basis of examination of the long bones which revealed that the infants were all of approximately the same age at death (around full term). Infanticide, they argued, drawing on ethnographic parallels, is generally carried out immediately after birth (Smith & Kahila 1992, cited by Mays 1993, p. 884). The Ashkelon infants have now been sexed on the basis of DNA by Dr Marina Faerman of the Hebrew University. She examined the skeletal remains of some 100 neonates which had been discovered in the sewer. Out of 43 left femurs tested 19 specimens produced results: 14 were found to be males and 5 females (Faerman 1997; *pers. comm.*) In other words, more males than females were being killed and deposited in the sewer — preferential male infanticide. Despite site-specific interpretations of this data⁴ it is possible that this is not an isolated phenomenon.⁵

12.3 Disabled infants and infanticide

Was the infanticide of disabled babies a routine part of history? Despite the importance for Disability Studies of accurate historical narratives, there are only two papers which seriously address the subject of infanticide and disability in antiquity (Bredberg 1999; Edwards 1996). This is disturbing in light of the recent publicity given to the Princeton philosopher and bioethicist, Peter Singer. Through the medium of his academic works (*e.g.*, Kuhse & Singer 1985; Singer 1995), and through popular media outlets, Singer has made much of his advocacy of termination for abnormality and of the infanticide of disabled babies, and, in justification of his position, he makes great play of the fact that the ancient Greeks practised infanticide of the 'handicapped'. This assertion carries rhetorical weight and resonance, apparently articulating an image of civilised citizen philosophers, inventors of democracy, drama and history, wisely disposing of the disabled at birth.

⁴Scott (1999) expresses some doubts about the validity of the interpretation of girl infants being raised to work in a brothel.

⁵Simon Mays and Marina Faerman are currently working on a hugely important Roman research project, DNA sexing infants from Romano-British rural contexts, such as villas and farmsteads. This is work in progress, but Simon Mays has very kindly informed me that the early indications are that more male infants than female currently appear to be represented in these samples.

Disability Studies is beginning to question the premise of infanticide being an entrenched human response to infant disability, but for a long time the writing of disability history has reflected the supposed long time-scale within which disabled people have experienced discrimination. The resulting 'orthodox' history of disability constructs both discrimination and disability, and the forms and outcomes of discrimination and disability, as immutable human conditions. This history is one in which the disabled have been unwanted and expendable since deepest antiquity, to the point of being killed at birth. While there is a certain empowerment to be obtained from the creation of hard-hitting, arresting narratives which portray widespread and long-term injustices, I would suggest that there may be greater empowerment in challenging the given orthodoxy altogether. Given the context of the details, archaeologists and ancient historians will have a rôle in assisting such a project. It will require a reappraisal of those current views on disability and archaeology which tend, however unwittingly, to reinforce orthodox prejudices (see papers in the *Archaeological Review from Cambridge*, 15(2), especially that by Molleson; see also Parker Pearson 1999, p. 104). The theoretical conceptualisation of the body, gender and the lifecourse is now firmly in place in archaeology, and the discipline could really make a difference and advance knowledge in the field of disability history. For example, most archaeologists would presumably not find much to argue with in Tom Shakespeare's assertion that there is danger in confusing the biological evidence with social experience (Shakespeare 1999, p. 100). After all, what is a disability? What is a handicap? What is deformity? Ideas already current in archaeological theory, such as Judith Butler's theories of the body and performance (*e.g.*, Butler 1990, 1993, 1997), would suggest that disability is written on the body, and that the social experience of the body is indeed more important than the simple recognition of biological or physical differences.

12.4 Reconsideration of the evidence

What actually happens if we reconsider the idea that disabled infants in the past were routinely killed through the practice of infanticide? Are there really myths to be dismantled?

The main evidence for the ancient Greek practice of killing disabled infants comes from a passage in Aristotle's *Politics* (1335b) where he recommends that there should be a law forbidding the rearing of disabled children. Aristotle's statement has been taken to mean that the ancient Greeks in general had a very negative view of disability and that they did not, would not, rear disabled infants. But Aristotle's view is a recommendation, so presumably at least some people had raised disabled infants. It is also dangerous to use the statements of individuals from ancient Athens, especially when they are taken out of context, to reinforce modern observers' own stereotyped views of human behaviour. Many such statements have a questionable relationship with reality on a number of levels, and often reflect attempts to set up ideological constraints in times of social change and tension.

Another well-known snippet of evidence on this subject comes from a dialogue in Plato's *Republic*. In this passage it is suggested hypothetically to the parents of an 'ill-formed' infant that it should be taken away and exposed. A father, having produced a disabled child, is asked:

Will you be able to bear seeing [your child] examined, and not get angry if someone takes it away from you, even though it is your first delivery?

The passage is a difficult one to interpret, dealing in hypotheticals and ideals, but nevertheless the possible answers to this question do include: 'No. No, I won't be able to bear seeing it taken away'. Indeed, the writing of the passage really only makes sense if there was actually some possibility of resistance being shown to the idea by the parents to infanticide on the grounds of disability.

Perhaps a clue to where we should be going with the Platonic evidence, in terms of interpretation, is in the phrase 'even though it is your first delivery'. The Athenians were concerned with numbers of children in families for a number of reasons. The ancient Athenians were 'almost neurotically conservative' (Jones 1984, p. 157) about preserving households and clan groups, and they would kill newborn infants — male, female, disabled, abled — if there were already enough children born into a family to carry the responsibilities of inheritance and political participation.

The deformed infant cannot be universally invoked as a cause of infanticide, however tempting it may be for modern observers obsessed with the prevention of the birth of disabled infants. In actual fact, there is ample evidence that newborns with visible defects were accepted, raised and cared for, from the Ice Age through to Medieval Europe and beyond (see, for example, Parker Pearson 1999, pp. 71, 151). Human bones expert Simon Mays has observed that amongst the infant remains he examined from Roman Britain, a context in which he strongly suspects infanticide was practised, he could find no evidence at all of any skeletal deformities (Mays 1993, p. 887), which would suggest that in Roman Britain visible deformity was not the prime mover in the decision to neglect, abandon or kill a neonate. There is also evidence from Medieval societies — hardly known for their compassion and tolerance — that those with deformities were allowed to function as part of the community. A study by Skinner (1997) of adult nicknames in use in Mediterranean communities has identified the use of *Surdo* (deaf), *Gardapedem* (looking at feet), *Monoculum* (one-eyed), and *Stultus* (mad). That some of these deformities may have originated in birth defects is suggested by the work of Crawford on Anglo-Saxon cemetery data: she concludes that the adolescents found with birth defects, and artefacts such as a pot specially adapted for a child with a cleft palate, reveal that infants with obvious deformities were raised in Medieval society. In addition, law codes existed which make provision for parents who knowingly and deliberately raised disabled children from birth to adulthood (Crawford 1991, 1999, pp. 172–3).

In Greek myth, disabled newborn were feared but they were not killed, and some grew up to be powerful rulers. Myskellos, for example, was born with twisted legs and a hunchback, and was said to have established and ruled the colony of Croton (Ogden 1997).

Such a fear of difference is best exemplified by the fact that healthy 'normal' infants who were the product of multiple births were often also rejected, a social phenomenon which has recently been studied by Dasen (1997, pp. 49–63). Aristotle regarded the birth of human twins as abnormal and belonging to the category of monstrosities, because he believed that: 'their formation is contrary to the general rule and to what is usual'. His abhorrence of twinning can be better understood in the context of the Athenian male's fear of female adultery and loss of paternity — note Aristotle's description of a woman who gave birth to twins, one of whom looked like her husband and the other her lover. The idea of such 'superfecundation' appears in Greek myth; and beliefs in the essential differences between male and female at the point of development in the womb were articulated through the medical ideas of men like Pliny and Aristotle, who believed that the risks to twins were increased if they

were of different sexes because male and female foetuses do not develop at the same rhythm.

In fact Peter Singer's ideas are predicated on a fundamental misunderstanding of the rôle of infanticide in the past. Infanticide was first and foremost a method of contraception, and many societies in antiquity sanctioned it in many contexts, and some of these societies transformed it into a culturally significant public practice. It is very dangerous to suggest that societies in the past routinely disposed of particular types of infant because they manifested a biological commodity which we modern observers have arbitrarily decided is inherently 'unvalued' or 'unwanted'.

12.5 Conclusion

The beliefs which pervade archaeology that such forms of preferential infanticide were endemic in prehistory and classical antiquity need careful handling. This paper has suggested that it may be a modern myth that infanticide is the story of the killing of the female and the disabled. The cultural variation in the evidence would appear not to allow for such universals.

The ancient Athenians killed male babies as well as female. The ancient Carthaginians made great play out of sacrificing wealthy male babies and children, and recent DNA testing of mass infant skeletal deposits from Roman contexts suggests that male infants may be represented more than female infants in these probable contexts of infanticide, and that none of these were disabled. The decision to kill a baby on the grounds of its sex is intimately bound up with culture-specific constructions of gender, kinship and economic structures, such as dowries and patterns of inheritance. We should presumably approach the issue of the infanticide of disabled infants with a similar regard for the complexities of the archaeological and historical evidence, and not pass off interpretations based on prejudice with some kind of historical tradition.

The infant embodies powerful sets of contradictions and tensions, being at the same time powerless and powerful. In life, and particularly in death and burial, the infant is often outside society and yet is made a marker of that same society's social and ideological priorities. The manipulation of the infant, the infant dead, infant space and images of the infant frequently acts as metaphor for adult relationships and tensions, from the micro- scale of the family to the macro-scale of major political systems. Infanticide, particularly infant ritual sacrifice as seen at Phoenician Carthage, may well signal an evolving relationship between biological genetic imperatives and human attempts to control posterity in more cultural ways (Scott 1999).

The Roman world continues to produce a wealth of evidence for the death and burial of infants and children, and archaeology continues to offer us increasingly detailed and sophisticated ways of analysing and interpreting this material. Perhaps if we can get past the entrenched ideas that the victims of infanticide were of no 'value' and that they must therefore belong to categories which the modern observer feels had (and perhaps have) little value, then we might move forward and create a more useful debate and avoid circularity of argument. The ninety-seven infants buried at Hambleton villa will not be explained simply by assigning them to value-less categories. On a final salutary note it should perhaps be observed that we do not, of course, even know for sure how the Hambleton infants actually died.

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Eleanor Scott
King Alfred's University College
Winchester
SO22 4NR
e.scott@wkac.ac.uk