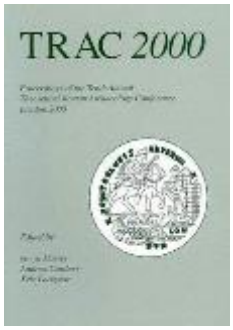

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Playing Dead: implications of mortuary evidence for the social construction of childhood in Roman Britain

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13.1 Introduction

The latter half of this century has seen a radical overhaul in our understanding of the concept of childhood. Initiated by developments in history (*e.g.*, Ariès 1962; Hoyles 1979; Pollock 1983; Shorter 1976; Stone 1977), it has now become widely recognised that perceptions of childhood do not subscribe to a universal (Western) norm, but instead are contingent upon historical and cultural context. Recent works within anthropology and sociology have begun to conceptualise children and childhood as a valid and important area of study and children are no longer thought of simply as passive beings, acting solely under the socialising influence of adults (Hardman 1973). As Prout and James state:

> For some time now it has been possible to think of a theoretical space in which children ... can be looked at as active social beings, constructing and creating social relationships. (Prout & James 1997, p. 23)

Until recently, however, archaeological interest had gone little further than noting the probability of high mortality rates among children and their under-representation at cemetery sites, or drawing attention to the more sensationalist practices of sacrifice and infanticide (*e.g.*, Philpott 1991; Watts 1989). It has been argued that the neglect of children within archaeology is a consequence of those same androcentric biases that had previously served to marginalise women: not only has the past been interpreted from a purely male perspective, but also in overtly adult terms (Baker 1997; Lillehammer 1989). As Baker (1997) states:

> ... children have been both absent/invisible from the archaeological record, and invisible, unknowable at the conceptual level. Contemporary culturally constructed social knowledge, embedded as it is in masculist ideologies, fits 'children' in the interpretative framework as incomplete humans, that is, not male/masculine (Baker 1997, p. 187)

Feminist and gender discourses have acted as a stimulus to current debates concerning the 'invisibility' of children in narratives of the past and have highlighted the need for archaeologists to recognise the culturally-specific status of childhood (*e.g.*, Moore & Scott 1997; Sofaer Deverenski 1994). Current research now emphasises the importance of children both socially and economically in the structuring and functioning of past societies (Sofaer Deverenski 1994, 1997).

Very little work, however, has examined the relationships and tensions between age groupings, or has attempted to identify age thresholds in past societies. This neglect would appear to stem from the fact that age (more so than gender or ethnicity) is considered to be a purely biological phenomenon and subsequently age identities and age rôles have become naturalised. When an identity is naturalised, it also becomes imbued with universal properties, thus seemingly allowing us to project our contemporary age paradigm onto the past irrespective of social context (Gowland forthcoming).

Children have arguably suffered the most from this disregard of age identity. It is evident that there has been a tendency to apply only vague terminology to children, and terms such as infant, child, and adolescent are used with little standardisation or definition. Furthermore, the appropriateness of these terms (accompanied as they are by numerous social expectations of behaviour derived entirely from a contemporary Western context) for describing life course stages in the past remains unquestioned. We should be aware that through the use of such language we are not simply describing a chronological stage in the life course, but also imparting an age identity that has a questionable relevance to past societies.

Identifying the nature of childhood within any one period from the archaeological record is problematic. While artefacts relating, for example, to the dress of immature individuals (*e.g.*, van Driel-Murray 1999) provide a tangible link to past children, as do items such as the mammiform pot, interpreted as an infant's feeding vessel, excavated from Castledyke cemetery, Barton-on-Humber (Drinkall & Foreman 1998), they offer limited information concerning the experience and perceptions of childhood within that particular cultural setting. The material world of the child within present Western society is entirely different from that of adults and is one which relates to, and constructs, our perception of childhood as a distinctive stage of human development. It would be a mistake, however, to project this material distinction into the past, and attempts to access children archaeologically through the identification of 'toys', for example, are potentially problematic in that they confine the experience of childhood to that of the Western construct. When addressing children within archaeology, we should perhaps dismiss the notion of 'finding' them, and instead recognise that as individuals interacting as an important, and possibly materially indistinguishable part of the cultural milieu, they are no more or less 'visible', or responsible for creating the archaeological record, than other social actors (Sofaer Deverenski 1994).

13.2 Mortuary evidence: materials and methods

In light of the above, one could argue that our best direct contact with children in the past is via their skeletal remains. Funerary evidence has been used widely in the study of past social identities, providing valuable contributions to debates concerning such social constructs as gender, ethnicity, and status. It is, however, apparent that the social construction of age has been almost entirely overlooked. This study explores the way in which cemetery variables and material culture associations may be used to identify possible age constructs based on the fourth-century AD cemetery of Lankhills in Winchester (Clarke 1979).

Lankhills cemetery was chosen, in part, because children are relatively well represented, but also because of the high frequency of burials at this site with grave goods. In this respect Lankhills is not typical of all fourth century cemeteries, and the degree to which we are able to extrapolate the results from this cemetery to

generalise about other areas of the country is of course open to question. Regional idiosyncrasies in funerary practice frequently frustrate such attempts, although the findings from Lankhills will be briefly compared here to several other fourth century Romano-British cemeteries.

Funerary ritual, in some respects, may be seen as a public ceremony that reinforces and reproduces prevailing social norms, representing or symbolising the status of the individual in death. How this reflects their status in life is, of course, open to debate and although the relationship is structured, we must be cautious when making inferences of social identity based upon this type of evidence. When we are examining the treatment of infants and children in death, we are of course investigating adult behaviour, not only attitudes and perceptions of the adults towards the infant, but how they and society in turn, viewed their rôle as parent or guardian (Pollock 1983). This relationship was likely to be subject to the influences of social, economic, cultural and religious variation. The relationship between prevailing societal attitudes and actual human behaviour is often complex and inferences from the funerary record are, of course, even more problematic in that we are investigating the product of symbolic action (Morris 1992). The analysis and identification of age/sex related patterns in grave good deposition at Lankhills, does however, provide an insight into funerary conventions that are likely to relate in some way to broader social constructions within the burying society.

All of the individuals from Lankhills, including the adults, were re-aged and re-sexed by the author. This was necessary because the original published report of the skeletal material represented an assessment only, and was conducted prior to the development of some of the more recent ageing techniques. The ages at death of the immature skeletons have been derived from observations of dental development (Moorrees *et al.* 1963a,b) and eruption (Ubelaker 1978), as well as long bone length (Gowland 1998; Hoppa 1992) and skeletal maturity indicators (Schwartz 1995). The adults have been aged primarily using dental attrition (Miles 1962) and pelvic indicators of age such as the pubic symphysis (Brooks & Suchey 1990) and auricular surface (Lovejoy *et al.* 1985).

The skeleton undergoes numerous changes throughout the life course, from an array of developmental changes during the growth period, to the more subtle alterations in bone topography throughout adulthood. Our ability to age skeletal material during the growth period has been accepted as approximately accurate, although methods are still subject to statistical biases (Gowland & Chamberlain forthcoming). Once skeletal maturity has been reached, after the age of approximately 25 years,[1] the ageing process is increasingly difficult to characterise and the estimation of age at death of adult skeletons is a process fraught with difficulty. Ageing adults with any degree of accuracy is, therefore, problematic, with the majority of techniques exhibiting a particular tendency to underage older individuals (Aykroyd *et al.* 1999, 1997).

Sex determination of the adult skeletal material was conducted using methods described in Krogman & Iscan (1986) and Buikstra & Ubelaker (1994). Unfortunately there are at present no reliable techniques for sexing immature skeletal remains other than DNA analysis (Saunders 1992); consequently those individuals below eighteen years of age have not been assigned a biological sex.

[1] It should be made explicit that skeletal maturity will not necessarily equate with specific cultural concepts of social maturity

Age	Sex unknown	Male	Female	Total
child	5			5
< 1	34			34
1–3	25			25
4–7	30			30
8–12	10			10
13–17	8	1		9
18–24	6	18	33	57
25–34	12	23	34	69
35–49	5	31	21	57
50+	2	19	11	32
Adult	53	11	17	81
Total	190	103	116	409

Table 13.1: The age and sex distribution of the Lankhills skeletal collection.

13.3 Mortality at Lankhills

A total of 451 graves were excavated at Lankhills (33 only partially so), six of which contained more than one burial (Clarke 1979, p. 13). The skeletal remains of 409 individuals from Lankhills were available for analysis and Table 13.1 shows the age and sex structure of the cemetery population. Of those individuals that could be sexed, there were approximately equal numbers of males and females over the age of 18 years. This is in slight contrast to the original report which found a slightly higher number of males than females. This discrepancy between findings has not arisen from a direct disagreement between skeletal analyses, but primarily from the fact that 38 more individuals were sexed in this study than in the original report, while some individuals classed as males in the published report were found in this study to be insufficiently preserved to be confident of sex. Many individuals over 18 years could not be sexed (78 in all), and there is no reason to suppose that the ratio of males to females at Lankhills was anything other than equal. With respect to the age structure, females have a younger average age at death than males. This is a common feature of cemetery reports and is usually thought of as arising from the risks associated with childbirth.

The levels of infant and child mortality throughout the various periods in the past are unknown. Estimated infant (defined as less than one year) mortality figures from modern pre-industrial populations have been found to vary widely, up to approximately 200 per 1000 live births (Hobbs & Kigguridu 1992). Mortality figures remain high for children up until the age of about five years, before gradually decreasing (Weiss 1973). Clearly we cannot extrapolate these figures directly for past populations, but estimates of infant mortality during the Roman period are usually placed between approximately 25–35% (Frier 1982). Despite the degree of uncertainty surrounding infant and child mortality statistics from Roman Britain, the proportion of children buried at Lankhills still falls far short of the numbers one might expect. A comparison of Lankhills with two other late Roman cemeteries (Fig. 13.1), indicates that children are generally under-represented (with a few exceptions, see Pearce this volume). This is not a phenomenon unique to the Romano-British period: the situation is, if anything, more acute at fifth and sixth century cemeteries. In a survey of Pagan Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, for example, Crawford (1991a,b) found that only ap-

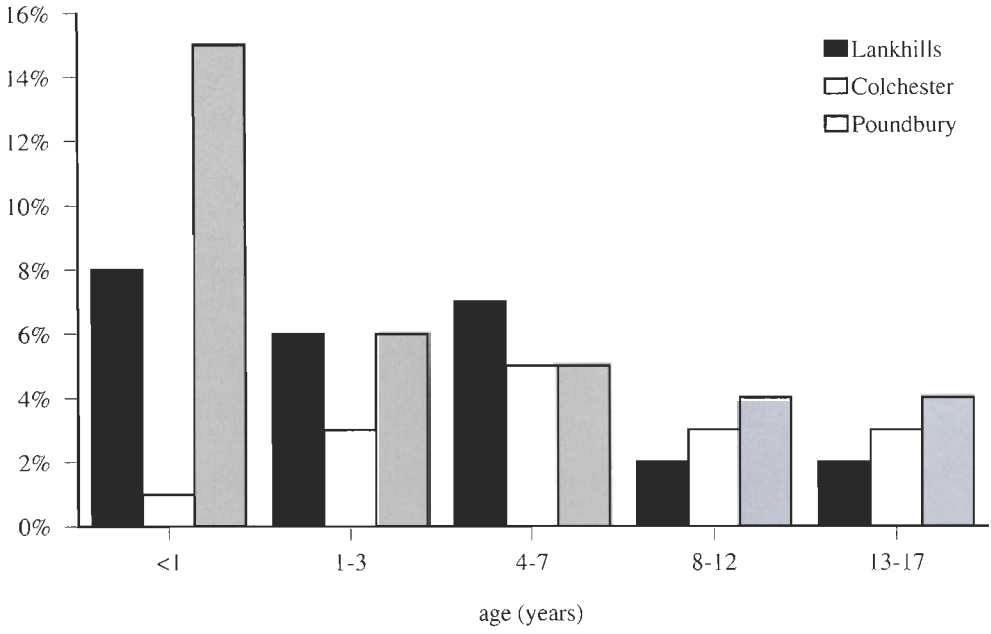

Figure 13.1: Age distribution of the immature individuals expressed as a percentage of the entire cemetery population. Lankhills: $n = 409$ (total number of individuals analysed in this study); Colchester: $n = 575$ (Pinter-Bellows 1993, p. 63); Poundbury: $n = 1075$ (Molleson 1993, p. 212)

proximately 10% out of a sample of 1005 aged burials were less than five years of age, despite these cemeteries having been chosen specifically because they had relatively higher proportions of child burials.

13.4 Infant death and burial

Although taphonomic factors undoubtedly contribute towards this trend (*e.g.,* see Buckberry 2000; Walker *et al.* 1988), it is clear from the Roman period at least, that cultural practices are also responsible for the exclusion of infants from cemeteries. In most regions in Britain, infants have been excavated, often in substantial numbers, from within and around settlements and villas (Scott 1991, 1992; Struck 1993). This differential treatment of infants in death has generally been interpreted either in terms of ritual (but one having little to do with the funerary concerns of the infant), or disposal (*e.g.,* Cocks 1921; Watts 1989). Intrinsic to the latter interpretation are preconceptions concerning a lack of emotional attachment to young infants in response to high infant mortality or the practice of infanticide (see Pearce this volume). As Golden states:

> It is almost a cliché to argue that rites for children are less elaborate, the pollution caused by their death less powerful simply because they played a less important social rôle; they have not fully entered into the community, and so can make the transition out of it more easily. (Golden 1990, p. 85)

Addressing the issue of infanticide, Mays (1993) aged a sample of 164 infants excavated from Roman settlements and cemeteries and found that the age distribution exhibited

a pronounced neonatal peak at 38 gestational weeks. Finding this data to be incompatible with twentieth century perinatal mortality records as well as archaeological evidence from the medieval cemetery of Wharram Percy, Mays (1993) suggested that infanticide may have contributed to the observed peak in the Romano-British data. The ageing technique used by Mays was the Scheuer *et al.* (1980) regression method, where age at death is derived from long bone length. Several authors have demonstrated that regression ageing techniques, if developed using known age samples that do not have an equal number of individuals in each age category, can produced biased results (*e.g.*, Aykroyd *et al.* 1999, 1997; Bocquet-Appel & Masset 1982). In a previous study Gowland & Chamberlain (forthcoming) found that the age distributions obtained from several archaeological studies that had employed the method of Scheuer *et al.* (1980) were strikingly similar: all exhibited a very pronounced neonatal peak at about 38 weeks gestation. This peak corresponded with the age distribution of the reference sample used by Scheuer *et al.* (1980), suggesting that it may have been an artefact of the ageing method used. A subsequent reassessment of this methodology found that this was indeed the case, and that when a large sample of almost 400 Roman infants were re-aged using a Bayesian statistical technique, the age distribution obtained was compatible with that expected when still-births as well as neonates were accorded similar burial rites (*i.e.*, a much broader range of ages at death). In other words, no osteological evidence was found to substantiate interpretations of infanticide (Gowland 1998; Gowland & Chamberlain forthcoming).

It is important to note that the ages of infants buried within settlements and villas ranges from approximately 24 gestational weeks to six months, after which they tend to be accorded different burial rites (Gowland 1998). This phenomenon is, therefore, a repeated funerary ritual associated with a very specific age group. The issue of when a foetus is considered a human being is much debated amongst anti- and pro-abortion groups within modern Western society. It is evident that a miscarried foetus and often a stillborn, will not receive the same burial as a baby that dies even after just a few days (La Fontaine 1986). This distinction, so important in our society, is not one that is apparent from the archaeological evidence in Roman Britain. Literary evidence relating to Rome indicates that an infant only attained an individual social identity on the day that it was named (the *lustratio*), a ceremony that took place on the eighth day after birth for females and ninth for males (Rawson 1991; Weidemann 1989). Further evidence relating to the Roman period however, indicates that infants were not perceived to have attained true personhood prior to teething, and possibly walking and talking (Philpott 1991; Watts 1989). The relevance of historical evidence relating to Rome, for attitudes in Roman Britain is, of course, open to considerable debate, but on the basis of such evidence one could argue that the grouping of stillbirths and infant deaths is to be expected; they were all considered non-people, and of little subsequent importance. Why then are they not found within rubbish deposits rather than houses and settlements? The incorporation of the infant in death, firmly within the social sphere of the living, should not be dismissed so readily. Perhaps the burial of infants was confined to the domestic sphere, not because it was convenient for disposal, but because the household represented the social world of that child. As the social relations or influence of infants tends not to extend beyond the immediacy of the household, one could argue that their burial was conducted within the small social arena of which they were a part. This may highlight the social constraints and lack of funerary ritual associated with miscarriage in our society: materially a non-event that belies the considerable emotional upheaval that such an experience provokes.

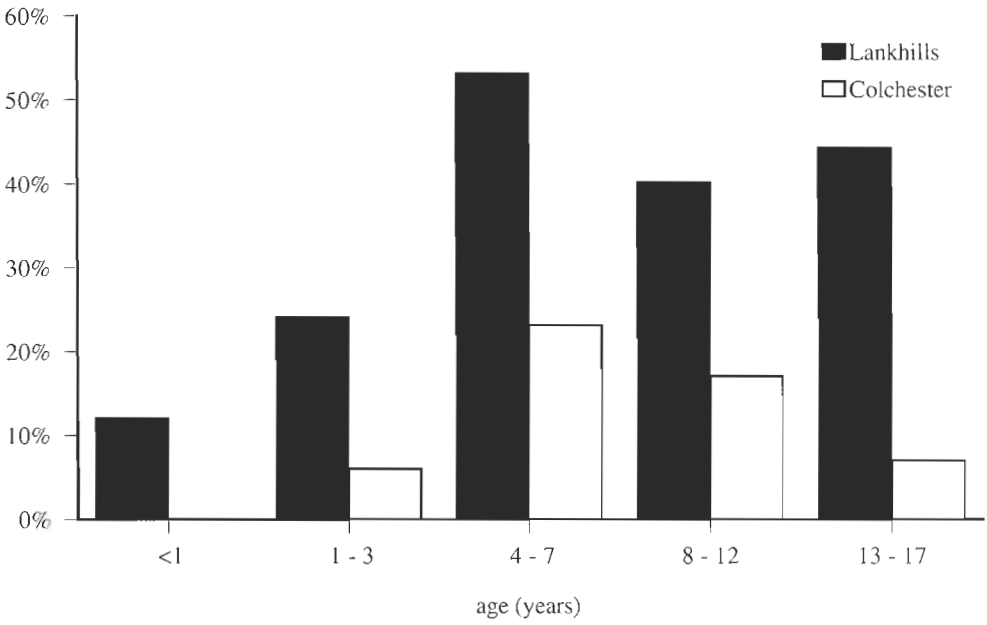

Figure 13.2: Percentage of individuals in each age category to be buried with grave goods.

13.5 Child burial at Lankhills

Focusing now on those children buried within Lankhills cemetery, one of the main sources of information used to examine age identities are the grave good associations. The numbers of individuals of each age group buried with grave goods, as well as the quantities, types, material and positions of those goods, have all been examined in order to discern any age-related material culture patterns. Grave good associations have been used widely to infer particular aspects of individual and social identity in Anglo-Saxon archaeology, but less so in studies of the Romano-British period, due in part to the dearth of grave inclusions from cemetery sites of the latter. Lankhills is unusual in that it has an exceptionally high number of grave goods compared with other contemporary Romano-British cemeteries, therefore lending itself to this type of analysis.

In total, 40% of females, 37% of males, and 26% of individuals less than 18 years of age had grave good provisions. When we compare the actual quantities of artefacts interred (hobnails have been excluded from this particular analysis), however, 30% of the total number excavated from the cemetery were associated with adult females, 16% with adult males, while 34% were buried with individuals under the age of 18 years (the remaining 20% of goods having been recovered from the graves of individuals of unknown sex or age). Therefore, despite fewer 'children' than adult males having been buried with grave goods, they actually have a higher proportion of the overall quantity of artefacts.

The percentage of 'children' (individuals under eighteen years of age) buried with grave goods (Fig. 13.2) alters considerably throughout the 'childhood' period. Individuals from the age of four years onwards, for example, are much more likely to be buried with grave goods. A comparison was made between these findings and those of the fourth century cemetery at Butt Road, Colchester (Crummy *et al.* 1993). Overall,

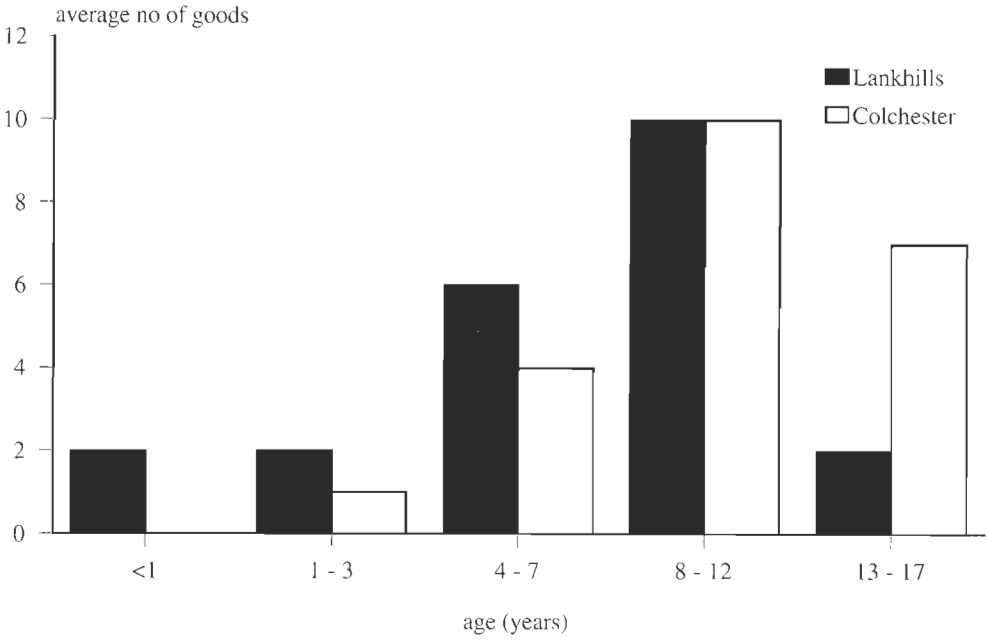

Figure 13.3: Average number of goods with each immature age category.

grave goods are much less frequent at Colchester than Lankhills. However, as Figure 13.2 demonstrates, the structure of the age-related pattern in grave provisioning amongst the immature individuals is not dissimilar.

Observing the actual quantity of goods for each age group (taking into account only those individuals buried with grave goods), it becomes evident that while approximately equal proportions of individuals over the age of four years were buried with grave goods, the average quantity of goods peaks between the ages of 8–12 years (Fig. 13.3). Again, when the results from Lankhills are compared with Colchester the pattern is approximately similar, although at Colchester the number of goods interred with individuals between the ages of 12–17 years remains high.

At Lankhills none of the neonates were buried with grave goods and only a small percentage of infants under one year of age were buried with any goods at all. Of those that were, the quantity and variety of types are limited. Personal ornamentation is rare, and grave goods are restricted to pottery vessels and coins. When we compare these findings to other cemeteries, we see that at Colchester none of the infants under one year of age were buried with goods (although it should be remembered that there are actually very few individuals of this age present at all). We must not take a lack of grave goods as consistently indicating a lesser social status, however, as instances of young infants buried within tile or decorated lead coffins are known from Colchester (Crummy *et al.* 1993) and Cirencester (McWhirr 1986). It is difficult to interpret these burials in relation to the perceptions of infancy as a category because, as discussed earlier, those infants buried within the cemetery would already appear to be in some way exceptional.

In the 1–3 year age category at Lankhills, we start to see an increase in the average quantity of goods interred with the deceased. The variety of vessel-types increases, and more occasionally, items of jewellery may be included. It is interesting to note that no individuals below the age of four years were buried with worn items

of personal adornment and the grave goods were primarily gender neutral: that is, objects not consistently associated with either biologically sexed males or females at this cemetery.

From the age of four years onwards a marked rise in the numbers of individuals interred with grave goods occurs. There is also an increase in both the quantity and variety of types of goods and from this age large numbers of bracelets, finger rings and necklaces are deposited. There is a relative decrease in the likelihood of being buried with coins compared to the younger age groups. The number of grave goods deposited within any one grave peaks in the 8–12 years age category (Fig. 13.3) where, again, items of personal adornment are most prolific. After the age of 12 years there is, however, a noticeable drop, less in the proportion of individuals buried with grave goods, than in the quantity of those goods. Overall, therefore, individuals between the ages of 4–12 years experience a dramatic rise in both the proportion buried with goods and in the quantity of goods deposited. These assemblages are amongst the richest in the entire cemetery and are characterised by large amounts of jewellery.

13.6 Discussion and Interpretation

This brief review of the grave good evidence for the under 18 age category at Lankhills demonstrates that we should not continue to regard these individuals as belonging to a homogenous category of 'children'. In order to begin to interpret the age-related material culture patterns, we must examine this evidence in relation to the graves and grave good assemblages of the rest of the cemetery. In this way we may contextualise the findings of these younger individuals within the entire life course, allowing us to examine age identities beyond the child/adult dichotomy. When examining the remains of skeletal material over the age of approximately 18 years we are able to determine biological sex. When considering the grave good assemblages of these individuals we are, therefore, able to not only establish whether certain goods are associated with either a masculine, or feminine gender, but also to observe the fluidity of gender and status dynamics with age.

The 'adults' at Lankhills have been divided into age categories according to Table 13.1. Approximately half of the adult females in all age groupings were buried with grave goods. Just over 50% of the total quantity of grave goods buried with females accompanied those aged in their late teens or early twenties. A substantial proportion of the total female goods were, therefore, confined to a highly restricted age grouping. Furthermore, the graves of these younger females frequently contained numerous items of personal adornment and grave goods manufactured from the more exclusive materials, such as glass, jet and ivory, compared to the pot and bone objects found with the older females.

In the grave assemblages of the male burials, the reverse is true. There are comparatively fewer grave goods amongst the younger adult age groups and little variation in grave good type. Amongst the older male age groups, however, there is an increase in both variation and quantity of grave goods. In contrast to the females, it is the older males at Lankhills that are buried with, for example, the silver, pewter, and glass materials. This age-related distinction amongst the males is not, however, as marked as that observed amongst the females.

While it is not the intention of this paper to address the age-related grave good provisioning amongst the 'adults' in any detail (although this is currently being investigated), some interesting patterns are clearly emerging. It is the implications of these

patterns for the social construction of stages of development that concern us here. It would appear from the grave good associations that gender-specific grave goods were deposited only with certain age groups. The expression of masculinity or femininity in death is not uniform but at least in part, is dependent upon age. Both the older females and individuals below the age of four years tend to be buried with fewer and non-gendered grave provisions. Halsall (1996) also found there to be a similarity in the graves of children and old people in cemeteries of early Merovingian Austrasia. He interpreted the reduced number of grave goods with these individuals as "demonstrating that deaths among neither group created much social stress" (Halsall 1996, p. 22). Rather than interpreting these burials as purely indicating a lower status, however, it could be that the expression of gender was associated with objects that are currently interpreted as reflecting high status (*e.g.*, bracelets, necklaces, *etc.*). Therefore, for the younger children and older females at Lankhills, one could argue that gender was not the overriding identity that it would appear to be, for example, for females in their twenties. Gender ambiguity in the material culture of the very young or very old has numerous ethnographic and historical correlates (Moore 1994). Up until the last couple of centuries in England, for example, young boys were attired in a manner very similar to girls, until about seven years of age when they were 'breeched'.

In contrast to the younger children and older women, it would seem that children aged between 4–12 years, and females in their twenties were buried with numerous items of material culture that have a strong feminine association (*i.e.,* the items are rarely recovered from skeletally-sexed male graves). Not only is there an increase in the quantity of grave goods from four years onwards, but there is also an apparent shift towards the inclusion of those grave goods typically differentiated by sex.

If we take the theoretical stance that funerary ritual is both structured by, and recreates, the social reality of the living, then we should assume that a shift in social status is occurring at around this age threshold, and what is more, this transition would appear to coincide with the expression of a more strongly signified gender identity. Literary evidence pertaining to Rome also indicates that the perceived identity of children underwent a transition after the age of about seven years, towards an identity that was more explicitly gendered. For example, after this age, terminology that differentiated between the sexes, *puer* or *puella*, rather than the asexual grouping of *infantia*, became appropriate. Furthermore, virginity is, for the first time, attributed as a characteristic after the age of seven years (Fraschetti 1997). From this age onwards, historical evidence also indicates that males and females experienced divergent chronologies in terms of social age transitions. Roman males underwent a significant rite of passage at approximately 14 to 16 years of age, during a ceremony that took place in both public and private, they replaced their *toga praetexta* with the *toga virilis* and removed their *bulla* (Eyben 1993, p. 6; Fraschetti 1997, p. 64). This event signified a new social age for males who were then considered 'more responsible' individuals as *adolescens*, until approximately 25 to 30 years of age (Weidemann 1989, p. 116).

Females had no similar rite of passage, the onset of menarche does not appear to have been socially significant, and only upon marriage did they experience a change in status (Fraschetti 1997, p. 63). This is in contrast to males where no clear distinction between an unmarried or married man is made with respect to terminology (Leijwegt 1991, p. 55). Epigraphic and documentary evidence indicates that high status females in Rome may have married as early as twelve years of age, puberty not apparently being a prerequisite for marriage (Hopkins 1965). However, Shaw (1987) in a re-examination of the epigraphic evidence from Rome and elsewhere in the Ro-

man Empire, has demonstrated that a more common age for marriage amongst lower status females was in fact from the late teens to early twenties.

In accordance with the findings of this study regarding the high frequency of females at Lankhills aged 18–25 years with buried grave goods, Hopkins (1987) has also demonstrated that females in the 15–29 year age group were more likely to be commemorated on Roman tombstone inscriptions than older females. Hopkins concluded that the younger women probably enjoyed heightened social estimation as being both wives and daughters. Again, the applicability of historical evidence relating predominantly to Rome to the prevailing attitudes and beliefs in Roman Britain may be considered tenuous, and epigraphic evidence, although used widely to infer demographic patterns for the Roman Empire, is laden with biases (for a discussion of some of these problems see Parkin 1992, p. 11). The existence of such evidence should, however, not be ignored as it provides, at least, a useful backdrop for comparison with the archaeological data from Roman Britain.

Examining the similarity in the grave assemblages of the 4–12 age category and females in their early twenties more closely, we may observe that in contrast to later fifth century Anglo-Saxon graves, many of the items of jewellery contained within Roman cemeteries are deposited in piles by the side of the body rather than worn. These items are, therefore, not necessarily related to everyday apparel or burial costume, but instead represent deliberate depositions. Approximately equal quantities of jewellery were recovered from the graves of adult females (96 items) and immature individuals (89 items), however only 14% of those found with the females are worn, compared to 39% with the immature skeletons (Fig. 13.4). In fact, none of the females in the 18–24 year age group have items of jewellery that are worn, they are all deposited by the side of the body. Of the unworn objects, those buried with the younger individuals were more frequently buried near the legs or feet, while those accompanying the adults tended to be buried next to the head.

When one compares such data to the findings at Colchester, we find that almost the reverse is true. Of those items of personal adornment buried with individuals under the age of 18 years at Colchester, only 13% were worn (the majority having been placed in piles next to the skull) compared to 43% buried with the adults (Fig. 13.4). Perhaps the important factor here is not whether the items were worn or not, but rather that a distinction was maintained between the adults and the young.

So although there is a similarity in the composition of grave assemblages of children between the ages of 4–12 years and young adult females, there are subtle differences between these groups in terms of placement of goods and whether they were worn or not. These differences may be important in terms of identity and demonstrate how different meanings can be conferred on, and imbued by, the same items of material culture depending not only on the gender of an individual, but also on his or her stage in the life course.

13.7 Conclusions

By adopting a life course approach, contextualising the study of the younger individuals within the entire life span, we may in some way elide the adult/child dichotomy that characterises the majority of studies, in order to more readily identify those age thresholds that have no symbolic or social significance within our current age paradigm. The imposition of almost arbitrary age categories upon the continuum of the life course is, however, unavoidable in this type of analysis and although such

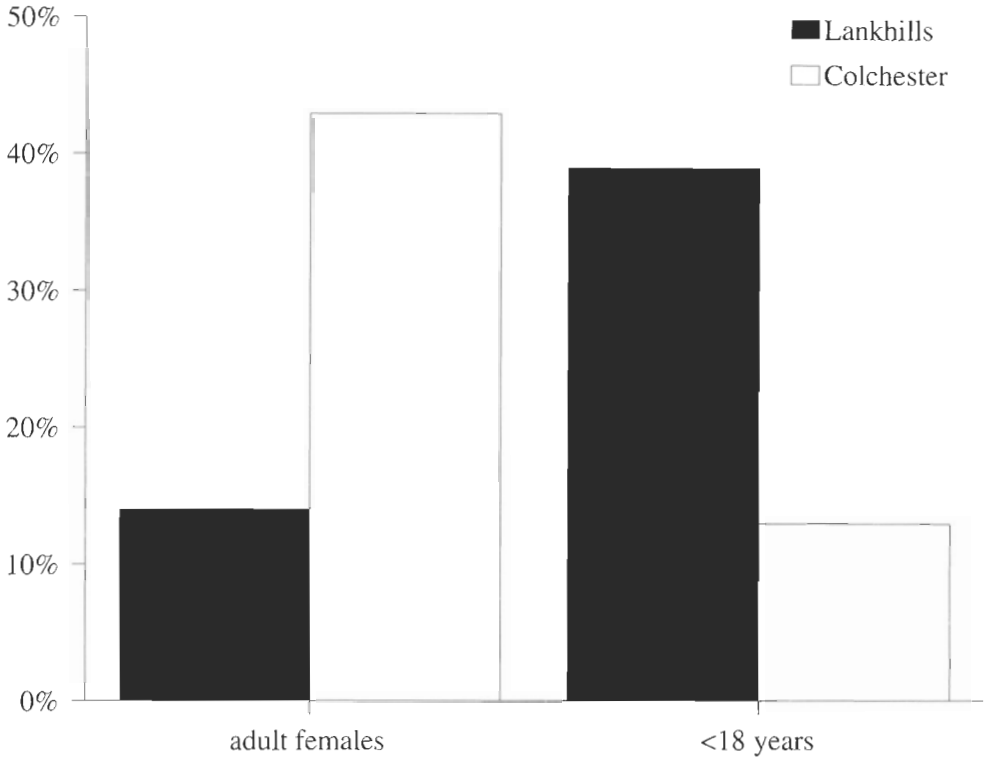

Figure 13.4: Percentage of items of personal adornment worn and unworn with age.

a procedure does effectively 'arrest' time for those individuals within the categories (and imposes a degree of homogeneity upon them that may be entirely false), we can at least remain open to a variety of possible categorisations.

Despite these problems, I believe that this outline of the age/grave good associations at Lankhills has been able to highlight a number of points. Firstly, we have shown that perceptions of infancy differ from our own in terms of the grouping of stillbirths and post-neonatal deaths outside of the cemetery context. Also, I would argue that there is another important age-related shift in identity that occurs around the 4–7 year age category extending to individuals of 8–12 years. I would further argue that this shift is in some way associated with a greater expression of gendered identity in death at least. The graves of these individuals are amongst the richest for the entire cemetery and this increase in burial wealth may also indicate a concurrent increase in the social status of children upon reaching this age threshold, although direct correlations of this nature are problematic.

The relative wealth of these graves may not, of course, be directly associated with the social identity of the interred, but relate instead to the sense of loss accompanying the untimely death of an individual of this age. A society's attitude towards death at different ages may profoundly influence the mortuary ritual. This concept of the 'bad death' is referred to in the literary evidence from Rome (Néraudau 1987) and it may be that the death of an older child was felt more strongly than that of a younger infant or child (Dixon 1988, 1992), perhaps because the risk of death generally diminished after the age of five years (Weiss 1973).

One other point that has arisen from this study (although differences in types and quantities of goods occurred throughout the life course), was the absence at Lankhills of that marked distinction in material culture that serves to differentiate and define children so effectively within our society. In the contemporary western world we have constructed a separate and distinctive material and social world of the child, one that both reflects and reinforces our perceptions of their specialness and vulnerability. This is absent from the cemetery evidence of Roman Britain, and may indicate that the emphasis and perception of the lived reality of childhood was not based on difference as it is today, but instead that children played a much more integrated rôle in the structuring and functioning of Romano-British society.

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