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Motherhood and Infancies in the Mediterranean in Antiquity

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Chapter 1

Motherhood and infancies: archaeological and historical approaches

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It is the patriarchy that is undoubtedly responsible for defining the prevailing social model in those communities that emerged in the Mediterranean in ‘ancient times.’ Due to its success, this model required the establishment and maintenance of certain relationships and gender identities that have become a means through which to define women throughout history. In this construction of feminine identity, a transcultural and transhistorical concept of maternity has been of significance; one in which biological and essentialist elements prevail with respect to what women should do or feel. As such, maternal instinct becomes an obligation and those women who do not possess it are considered abnormal. Furthermore, in order to attain acceptance as a universal issue, stereotypes have been generated with respect to mothers that are easy to both retain and transmit. Behind this natural and biological essentialism or this instinctive attitude lies a simplification of what motherhood means, one that strips it of all its claims to possess skills, or of all experiences beyond the natural; the idea that it possesses any form of knowledge or the ability to use technology is denied. It is as if bodily use were not managed by means of cultural factors. All social transcendence is denied, as if the very existence of communities did not hold the process of reproduction as its most transcendental condition. This social and cultural construction that is motherhood has only become an object of interest for archaeology or history in very recent times: these disciplines have treated the subject in a different way, exploring, as this book demonstrates, various theoretical and methodological approaches.

Recent contributions from history and archaeology question former paradigms, given that now discussion concerns mothers and maternity, children as people with defined roles, as active agents in societies. It is now acknowledged that reproduction involves the work, effort, experience and knowledge of women, not to mention the

modification of their bodies and the use of technology, and even their feelings (Sánchez Romero 2006). And, specifically, the important role of women is considered through their relationship with their offspring.

Motherhood took time to appear in academic environments of historical studies, including those related to gender and women. Feminism, however, did address the complex relationship between women and motherhood; from its rejection, which was ambiguously put forward by Simone de Beauvoir (1949), to its defence, by Luisa Muraro (1991). For that Italian philosopher, the close bond between mothers and their offspring had the ability to turn motherhood into a weapon of power, and not of submission, unlike the theory propounded by her French colleague. This is a central debate for contemporary feminism, which has been joined by other 20th century thinkers (Cid 2002; 2015). For example, between the two positions, which have now been mostly discarded, were Yvonne Knibiehler's noteworthy contributions in the 1970s. Knibiehler (2000) was a pioneer in the study of motherhood from a historical perspective and published what is considered to be the first book on the history of women in the West, together with Catherine Fouquet (Knibiehler and Fouquet 1980), and to date her research has been linked to motherhood from highly varied approaches. The pioneering work of the French researcher Françoise Thébaud (1986) has also been noted here, although her work focuses on contemporary society. There is no doubt that French historiography expressed an early interest in mothers and motherhood, one that has been increasing in recent decades. This is manifest in the monographic publications on maternity in the *Clio* magazine dossier (2005) or that specifically dedicated to antiquity in *Métis* (2013), although it only deals with the Greek case. From the work of Françoise Thébaud, we have been able to understand that motherhood was indeed the function traditionally assigned to women. The exercise of this role turned them into 'one-dimensional' beings and generated the socially-accepted idea of feminine identity par excellence, i.e. that the social role of women centred on procreation and the care of offspring. The undertaking of motherhood did not question, but rather reinforced, male social supremacy as women were destined to raise the offspring the husband wanted.

Although it is true that this has been the situation of many women of the past, from a historical standpoint we have observed the complex relationship that women have maintained with motherhood. Past societies, from ancient times to the present, offer us examples of women who rejected motherhood. Such attitudes provoked criticism from their peers, but even so they did involve the refusal to act as something other than an inseminated body, or to assume the role of care-giver to their husbands' children. These attitudes took them as far as Medea, who murdered her own children (McDermott 1989; López and Pociña 2002). In other cases, women are presented as mothers, however this is done while recreating normative discourses and attempting to use motherhood in a different sense. This was true of women who strengthened their social role and enjoyed areas of domestic and extra-domestic power, from the display of a motherhood that was occasionally outside the norm. Agrippina in

Imperial Rome is a paradigmatic example, with her keenness to control the life of Nero, according to the representations of Greco-Roman literature (Ginsburg 2006).

Regarding these issues, scholars of antiquity have also made noteworthy contributions. Suzanne Dixon's *The Roman Mother* or, in the case of Greece, the well-known book by Nicole Loraux, *Les Meres en deuil*, among others (Dixon 1988; Loraux 1990) are obligatory as works of reference. Myth, reality, laws, religion, politics and power, among other issues, were presented in these works, which were later reconsidered and expanded, or nuanced and questioned. This can be seen in the recent contributions on motherhood in the ancient Mediterranean (Hackworth and Salzman-Mitchel 2012; Cid 2009; 2010). Over time, the advances made in terms of knowledge regarding motherhood and mothers have led to the tackling of issues as specific as pregnancy or childbirth, by Veronique Dasen (2004; 2015) and Nancy Demand (2006), or the public role of mothers in the cities, through the contributions of notable women, as described in the works of Emily Hemelrijk (2015) and Cándida Martínez (Martínez and Serrano 2016; Martínez and Ubric 2017). Their works are exemplary in terms of understanding female public roles through 'civic matronhood,' an expression that refers to the work of women benefactors in the cities, who transferred their domestic roles into the public environment. These contributions are limited to the case of ancient societies and are only some of the significant examples. In any event, they prove the influence and dissemination of research on motherhood and maternity from the history of women and gender studies, which has served to revise the views on women of the past that are deeply-rooted in traditional historiography.

It is also significant that in the monumental work of Lynn Budin and Macintosh Turfa (2016) (over 1000 pages), which aims to offer a view of the history of women of antiquity, from East to West, with chapters specific to motherhood in almost all societies, from the Egyptian or Cypriot to the Etruscan, Greek or Roman.

In this respect, archaeology has also contributed to a conceptual change in the construction of motherhood in a particularly significant way. The works of Kathleen M. Bolen (1992), Elisabeth Beausang (2000; 2005), Laurie Wilkie (2003; 2010), Emer O'Donnell (2004) or Katharina Rebay-Salisbury (2017) made their contributions by placing motherhood at the centre of the debate on women, which has moved from a belief in naturalisation and immobility in the development of maternal practices and the non-recognition of children as full components of society, to articulating the appropriate methodologies used to recognise maternity practices in the archaeological record of past populations.

In Spain, this line of work has been especially rewarding in terms of the study of prehistoric societies. Interesting hypotheses have been established regarding human behaviour and the experiences and work of women. Almudena Hernando, in her different studies on the identity of women (Hernando 2001; 2012) shows how motherhood has been used by different authors to justify their identity in biological terms, through established dependency relationships. However, she places the origin of this identity type as a result of the consequences that derive from a loss of mobility

due to the constant care required by human offspring. Human youngsters are the weakest in the animal kingdom, due to their extended growth rates; a developmental event that occurred in the genus *Homo* some two and a half million years ago and which led to the prolongation of the foetal period to 21 months (although only nine are intrauterine), which makes these offspring totally dependent. This process evolved basically in order to allow our brains to reach half the size they will have in adulthood. It is this need for child care that reduces women's mobility and which engenders new ways of understanding time and space, while determining initially-established inequalities in a very subtle way (Hernando 2005).

Maria Angeles Querol has outlined the model of 'expansion of maternal behaviour to the rest of the group' (Querol 2005). About two million years ago East African hominids lived on the open plains and were exposed to dangers that could only be overcome through the reorganisation of the group's social relations; this helped individuals to feel cohesion through cooperation among themselves and in distribution of defensive tasks. Maria Angeles Querol believes that this cooperation and these mechanisms of solidarity could have had their origin in the most obvious social relations, i.e. maternal relations, which entail socialisation, the transmission of knowledge, the care of others, etc. The propagation of these behavioural characteristics, by means of various mechanisms, was to be one of the keys to the success and survival of these groups.

However, feminist-Marxist perspectives have analysed biological reproduction in depth, from theories on the production of social life, placing emphasis on the tasks of the production of bodies and the maintenance of subjects and objects, through which not only are sexual bodies essential for the social reproduction of the group created, but also that these individuals are cared for, attended to and socialised (Sanahuja 2002; Escoriza and Sanahuja 2005).

Furthermore, Spanish feminist archaeology has worked on the concept of maintenance activities, which has been essential to conceptualise the social significance of maternal practices and to define the strategies of human groups for their survival (Alarcón and Sánchez 2015). This survival depends not only on biological reproduction, but above all on tasks that take place in daily life, which guarantee the reproduction of the economic and social system of any community (Picazo Gurina 1997; Montón-Subías and Sánchez Romero 2008; Sánchez Romero 2014). These are responsibilities that, until the construction of the concept of maintenance activities, were assigned so little value that we did not even possess an analytical category with which to study them. From this perspective, analysis have been made of questions ranging from why history has not valued maintenance activities (Hernando 2005) to how food production and consumption is managed (Montón-Subías 2005; Sánchez Romero 2014), including an analysis of how the learning and socialisation of children is organised (Sánchez Romero 2008a; 2008b; 2017; Sánchez *et al.* 2015), care practices (Montón-Subías 2010) or the connection to the area of everyday life (Sánchez Romero 2015).

Among the main researchers in this archaeology of childhood are those from feminist and gender archaeology who understood the relationships (more or less

constructed) between women and infant individuals and the possibilities that a study of these relationships could provide to the historical discourse. They therefore decided to focus their research on children (Baxter 2005; 2009; Lillehammer 2010; 2015). Thus children and childhood have been described in terms of their bodies (Lewis 2006; Mays *et al.* 2017), the processes of learning and socialisation (Kamp 2001; Högberg 2008; Högberg *et al.* 2015) their spaces (Sánchez Romero *et al.* 2015) or their rituality (Ardren 2011; Murphy and Le Roy 2017).

Research into maternal practices becomes more appealing in the study of care practices and in the socialisation of children. Numerous theoretical and methodological approaches have permitted important moments such as childbirth to be recovered. On the Iberian Peninsula, one of the most interesting prehistoric examples is that of a pregnant woman aged about twenty who died during an obstructed labour, found in the Argaric site of Cerro de Las Viñas (Murcia). The burial reveals the remains of the mother with the newborn child still in the birth canal (Malgosa *et al.* 2004). The anthropological analysis of children is becoming one of the most innovative and informative aspects of this age group (Lewis 2006; Mays *et al.* 2017), including specific perspectives such as the bioarchaeology of the foetus (Halcrow *et al.* 2017).

Evidence of child-care practices is also manifest in many objects, as well as in the use of specially designed processes for food, transportation and clothing, in order to provide children with education, socialisation and entertainment. As these were considered to be natural, immutable and universal, no attention has been paid to the amount of work and knowledge involved or to the different technological and social strategies involved in, for example, breastfeeding and weaning practices in prehistoric societies, i.e. in the processes used to replace breast milk. It is obvious that these processes must have been influenced by various factors that were not only biological, but also environmental, cultural, social and concerning public health. The different communities would have met these needs through mechanisms that combined strategies of solidarity, elements of material culture and a broad range of knowledge (Reboreda forthcoming).

Learning and socialisation practices involve common processes through which children acquire skills and knowledge, they learn to use technology, they take on belief systems and instil values and skills in the world around them. Ideas and skills are acquired through the mechanisms of socialisation and learning. We understand learning as the acquisition of specific knowledge and the use of certain technologies that make children capable of performing productive tasks. Children must however also be able to handle other spheres related to identity and the development of normalised rituals within the adult world, i.e. socialisation. Knowing what strategies societies implemented to perform these processes successfully is important in order to discover how the mechanisms of social reproduction functioned in each community, as in the analysis of Bronze Age sites such as Cerro de la Encina (Monachil, Granada) or Peñalosa (Baños de la Encina, Jaén) (Sánchez Romero and Alarcón 2012). Both strategies have been proven to be a highly important source of information with

respect to past societies and which managed to turn children into active agents in societies.

As with archaeology, the history of childhood has also developed significantly. Philippe Ariès (1960) declarations regarding the children of the past, which today are difficult to swallow, are now very distant. Nonetheless, Ariès opened up a new area of research by singling out the infant population and emphasising its role in history. Although he denied young men and women their status as social beings, the laws of ancient societies reveal quite the opposite. This French historian may still have several followers, however most specialists affirm and defend that children (boys and girls) considered themselves social beings, with clearly assigned functions, taking their young age into account. This means that they are also historical agents. They were individuals who were preparing for adulthood, with their own presence and family role and, by extension, also a social role.

Greek and Roman sources however inform us of their presence in religious, domestic and public activities, especially in the streets of the ancient cities, and not only in the Greek *oikos* or the Roman *domus*. Those contributions made regarding childhood and education in the classical world are of enormous interest (Mustakallio *et al.* 2005; Evans Grubbs *et al.* 2013), as are those on this subject in the ancient Mediterranean (Justel Vicente 2012). In terms of childhood in the Greek and Roman world, the name Beryl Rawson is worth mentioning. She opened up prolific lines of research, focusing her study on the family, from where she analyses childhood, as in the book *A Companion to Families in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (2011). Alongside her contributions are those of Suzanne Dixon, also focused on family and childhood in Rome (1992; 2001), and not forgetting Veronique Dasen, whose work centred mainly on the relationship between childbirth, motherhood and the early stages of childhood. With respect to the Greek case, this author emphasises the role of children in family environments, in their religious role both inside and outside the home, and in their work activities (Dasen 2004; 2015).

Today the works of Christian Laes (Laes 2011; Laes and Strubbe 2014; Laes and Vuolanto 2017) with their own views of social history, perspectives that do not dispense with the cultural arena, are highly important. This author's works have allowed us to see the importance and the significant role of children in ancient societies, through the most varied testimonies, from iconography to laws. He introduces us to the variety of the child population and his keen reflections on the representations of childhood are noteworthy.

It was in fact the different debates on maternity practices, reproduction, motherhood and childhood and their dynamism, both from archaeological and historical perspectives, that led us to organise the seminar entitled *Maternities and Childhood. Historical and Archaeological Perspectives*, which was held on 27–28 October 2016 at the University of Granada. This meeting sought to delve into relationships between mothers and their offspring (whether male or female) and to assess whether maternity would have been a woman's exclusive function or whether they combined

this work with other tasks. It also sought to investigate the emergence of mother-daughter ties and their development from prehistoric to historical societies in the ancient Mediterranean; to discover in greater detail the true social, economic and technological dimension of maternal practices and to reflect on childhood from a gender perspective.

From the start it was based on a concept of maternity and childhood archetypes that broke with the unilateral images of motherhood and the mother and of childhood with the idea of boy and girl; to be precise, it attempted to value diversity. It was attended by specialists in archeology, law, classical philology and ancient history. It was also a matter of discussing views and diverse approaches, as well as different methodologies, although the gender studies perspective remained as the guiding thread. Several presentations gave rise to some of the chapters that comprise this book, however the need to possess a more complete and complex view of maternal practices in the ancient Mediterranean world led us to request the participation of other renowned experts in these matters, so that they could contribute new texts to this volume.

In this book we seek to understand how the very idea of motherhood was established as a social and cultural practice (García Ventura; Rueda *et al.*); how the identity of women was constructed through their relationship with motherhood from a social standpoint (Molas, Marina), a legal viewpoint (Pepe) or in the power relations, either as powerful women (Mirón; Dominguez; Mendez; Conesa) or from their position as slaves (Rubiera). We also try to understand how essential moments are represented and acknowledged in the lives of women, such as pregnancy or childbirth (Delgado Hervás and Rivera), or how relationships and emotions regarding sons and daughters were visualised either through iconographic (Reboreda) or epigraphic (Cid) representations. We will approach the different ways in which care practices were undertaken (Ferrer; Nuñez), review learning processes (Alarcón *et al.*) and seek to understand how the inclusion of children in funeral rituals could have had an apotropaic (López Bertrán) or a symbolic character (González Marcen), both for the children and for the populations at crucial times in the lives of these societies. We also analyse the ways in which current discourses on motherhood and childhood are transmitted by means of diverse educational strategies (Medina; García Luque).

The seminar arose due to the initiative and cooperation of two research groups from Spanish universities, whose work together in recent years has been highly productive. Specifically, that of the *Grupo GEA. Cultura material e identidad social en la Prehistoria Reciente del sur de la Península Ibérica* of the University of Granada and the *Grupo Deméter. Maternidad, Género y familia* of the University of Oviedo. These groups link two I+D projects, that of the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of the Government of Spain, *Innovación, hibridación y resistencia cultural. Las sociedades de III y II milenios cal BC en el sur de la Península Ibérica* [HAR2017-82932-P] and *Maternidades y familias. Permanencias, cambios y rupturas. Entre las sociedades antiguas y la contemporánea* [HAR2013-42371 R]. This publication is linked to these projects.

As editors, we would like to thank those people who participated in the seminar, and those researchers who later joined as the authors of this work. We believe that this publication will be a contribution of interest in furthering knowledge regarding mothers and children, who had been marginalised from historical studies until just a few decades ago. Women, girls and boys have been, without doubt, forgotten subjects (Knapp 2011) in historical research for a long time, however their historical agency ought to be acknowledged.

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