

Exposure of children

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In Greek and Roman antiquity, the exposure of newborn children was a socially accepted means of family planning. Neither Greek legislation nor the TWELVE TABLES and later laws impose a prohibition on exposure. Within the first few days after a birth, the father of the house decided whether the infant should be exposed or accepted. After a child was accepted into the domestic community through ritual practices, it was no longer possible to expose it. Neither literary sources nor demographic models can give even an approximation for the number of children who were exposed: scholars are divided over whether the number of exposed children reached a demographically relevant proportion (cf. Golden 1981; Harris 1994; Corbier 2001: 66). Exposed infants were usually deformed or conceived outside marriage (Pl. *Resp.* 5.460c; Arist. *Pol.* 7.16.1335b 19–26; Sen. *Ira.* 1.15.2). A small number of sources indicate that more girls than boys were exposed (Poseidippos F 12 PCG; Ter. *Haut.* 626–8). Since a father's possessions were transmitted to the next generation according to the principle of partible inheritance in Greece and Rome, an excessively high number of children could lead to the estate being divided into many small parts, none of which could provide an economically viable basis for supporting a household. For this reason it was also acceptable to expose “supernumerary” children. Economic constraints are also mentioned in the sources as a reason for exposure (Harris 1994: 11–15).

Scholarship is divided over whether the difference in marriage age of men and women was due to the frequent exposure of girls. Since sources which explicitly address this issue are lacking, it is impossible to establish whether men married women who were significantly younger because the cohorts of same-age women were smaller in number due to the

exposure of girls. The relative maturity of men at marriage is probably also due to the conventions governing transfer of the family house, and the low age of the bride to the necessity of using the whole length of a woman's fertile years for childbirth in order to assure the reproduction of the population.

The decision to expose newborn children was not made lightly. Although exposure myths and New Attic and Roman Comedy depict the practice of exposure happening as a matter of course, other sources give a sense of how difficult it was for a mother to expose her child (e.g., Pind. *Ol.* 6.35–72; Eur. *Ion.* 8–56, 859–965). While exposure was accepted in society, at the same time it was subject to taboo: it is noteworthy that all stories of exposure, both in myth (e.g., the exposure of Romulus and Remus), and in comedies and novels, always end with the finding of the child, often also with their return to their biological parents. Thus, authors avoided confronting society with the agonizing death of exposed children. The horror of the event is also masked in the euphemistic vocabulary used: newborn children are “exposed” (*ektithenai*, *exponere*), “concealed” (*kryptein*); they are “not worth rearing.” Connotations of force and infanticide are avoided (Schmitz 2005).

In the case of children conceived outside marriage, the woman in question tried to keep her pregnancy secret and exposed the child herself. In other cases, it was often a male or female slave who was charged with the exposure. Exposure in busy areas, such as the entrance of a sanctuary, was motivated by the hope that the child would be found and brought up. Further evidence for this hope is the exposure of children in nappies or in a basket, as well as the addition of tokens of recognition. Children exposed in pathless border territory, who would barely have had a chance of survival, are found and nourished by shepherds, wolves, dogs, or snakes in mythical narratives (Corbier 2001: 62–4). Exposed children who were taken up were usually reared as slaves (e.g., Plin. *Ep.*

10.65–6). The possibility of acquiring slaves by taking up exposed children, or of selling them as slaves later, may have increased the chance of survival of exposed children. But children received in this way could also be adopted as children of the family (Harris 1994; Corbier 2001: 67–9).

With the exception of a few passages (Isoc. *Panath.* 12.133; Paulus *Sent.* [Dig. 25.3.4]), there is hardly any evidence for condemnation of exposure before Jewish and Christian authors (Jos. *Ap.* 2.202; Philo *Spec. leg.* 3.110–19; *Ep. Barn.* 19.5; Justin *Apol.* 1.27; Tert. *Ad nat.* 1.15.3–4) and in Late Antique church council resolutions (*Conc. Elvira* canon 63, 306 CE) (Kleijwegt and Amedick 2004). In order to dramatize the act and to evoke moral guilt, sources with a Christian background express more clearly the fact that exposed children die a wretched death.

Various imperial measures were designed to support poor parents in rearing their children. But exposure was not subject to criminalization for a long time. Eventually, from 374 CE a law made exposure of children liable to punishment (*CJ* 8.51[52].2; 9.16.7[8] [= *CTh* 9.14.1]; Harris 19–22; Corbier 64–65).

SEE ALSO: Birth control; Childbirth; Childhood, Byzantine; Childhood, Egypt; Childhood, Greece and Rome; Infant diseases and mortality; Infanticide.

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