

Project description

Tiny Voices from the Past: New Perspectives on Childhood in Early Europe

1. General background and relevance

The way in which a society deals with its marginalised groups can be seen as an indicator of its degree of humanity. Thus, a study of the status and situation of such groups can reveal central features in a society's perceptions of humans and their value. During the last four decades or so this has been clearly shown in research on groups that have often been victims of disparagement and stigmatisation, such as women and sexual, social or ethnic minorities.

One group that has until recent years received limited attention is *children*. There are several reasons for this, but one is obvious: children are not able to assert themselves on their own. During the last two decades, however, interest in the study of children has changed greatly. Both in the public debate and within a broad spectrum of sciences much emphasis has been put on issues related to children, such as the autonomy of children, their formation, living conditions and rights, and on cultural ideas about children and childhood as a stage of life. This is a very joyful development, considering that children at all times have constituted a "major minority" – it is only high time that they be given their part in the history books.

Our present time is marked by swift social transformations, not least within a European setting. As a consequence, pressure on groups "at the margins" tends to increase. This poses challenges that make it crucial to retrace the sources of our history, so as to be able to throw our own times into relief, to see and understand the changes taking place, and to deal adequately with their effects on society's more vulnerable groups, such as children.

European societies have their main ideological roots in two historical traditions, those of Greco-Roman culture and of early Christianity. These traditions have greatly informed, and still – on a conscious as well as a subconscious level – inform the values and life views of today. This is not least the case as concerns perceptions of human nature and human value, and consequently also of the child as a human being. At the same time, these historical traditions are being contested by new developments within the natural sciences (e.g. biology) and by the emergence of other views of life, both secular and religious, within a European context. This too makes it all the more important to reflect on the relevance of these ancient traditions for our contemporary world.

2. The project

Period and aims

The project will deal with the era in which these cultural traditions originated, developed and came into interaction, viz., Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. The period covered,

5th century BCE to 12th century CE, will be very long, almost too long. There are, however, good reasons for casting the net widely: one is to make diachronic perspectives possible, another is to be able to include an early phase of interaction with Islam on European soil.

The main emphasis of the project, however, will be on late Antiquity and the earliest part of the Middle Ages (1st-8th century), which was a period of considerable cultural exchange and transformation. Sometimes, these centuries are perceived of as something separate from European history, as “Antiquity” or “the beginnings of Christianity”. Within the project, however, this period will consciously be dealt with as setting the stage for a gradually emerging European culture. The era also clearly has many features in common with our modern societies, with cultural encounters marked by tension and conflict, but also by dialogue and adaptation.

The general aims of the project will be: (1) to retrieve central aspects of childhood and children’s life in the interface between the Greco-Roman heritage and nascent Christianity, and – later – Islam; (2) to study the ways in which notions of childhood were utilised for other aims, e.g. as a reservoir for metaphor, but still convey important insights into children’s lives; and (3) to reflect on modern perceptions of children and childhood, using the ancient material to throw contemporary ideas of humanity and human values into relief. These are concerns which I shall expand on below.

History of research

Issues on children and childhood have become central concerns also within research on antiquity and the early Middle Ages. In order to situate the project within its context and to display its distinctive profile, it is necessary to give a cursory survey of the history of research on the period.

Modern research on children in early Europe began with Philippe Ariès’ *L’enfant et la vie familiale sous l’ancien regime* (1960). In this seminal study, Ariès presented two hypotheses, (1) that children all the way up to the 16th century lived under very bad conditions and usually experienced a lack of respect from adults, and (2) that childhood was recognised as a stage of life with its particular characteristics only from the 13th century on, and not fully before the 16th/17th centuries. His work became an impetus for other scholars to address issues of children in this period. Later research has been far more balanced than Ariès, both as concerns methodology and material. His hypotheses have been heavily criticised and to a large degree rejected; still, however, his views find support among some scholars.

Classical scholars were the first to respond to the challenges posed by Ariès, through a number of studies on the family in the Greco-Roman world, occasionally with focus on children (e.g. Wiedemann 1989; Golden 1990; Rawson 1991). Much of the research of this phase is crystallised in Rawson’s *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy* (2003). Her book, which is not representative of Roman material only, but to an extent also of antiquity in general, presents a nuanced picture of children’s life, both as concerns the many hardships children were exposed to, but also the affection and positive valuation they could experience. Her presentation involves a variety of issues and methodologies, with special focus on the life stages of childhood, gender issues, and representations of children in art.

Scholars within the field of early Christianity were slower in addressing issues of children and childhood. However, a change has taken place during the last decade or so,

with some studies on the Bible (seminal works are Müller 1992 and Strange 1996; very recent and important is Bunge 2008). Central elements of this research are summarised in Bakke's *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (2005). Here, he emphasizes early Christianity's many continuities from antiquity, but he also points to certain developments, such as an ideal of children's humanity, more restrictive views on abortion, infanticide, exposure and sexual relations between children and adults, a change in ideas of formation and education with new curricula and greater emphasis on parents' involvement, and an upgrading of children's moral responsibilities.

The contributions of Rawson, Bakke and others have laid a solid foundation for further research on the issue of childhood. Important works, which partly develop on and partly criticise earlier views, have quite recently been published by Horn/Phenix (2009) and Horn/Martens (2009).

During the last decade, several studies dealing with children from more specific angles – such as birth, life stages, disabilities, regional characteristics, and artistic representations – have been published (Harlow/Laurence 2002; Neils/Oakley 2003; Dasen 2004; George 2005; Uzzi 2005; Laes 2006; Cohen/Rutter 2007; Laes/Mustakallio 2011), adding further nuances to the picture of children and childhood in the period. Eastern traditions, particularly the Byzantine era, has especially in recent years received some attention (Miller 2003; Hennessy 2008; Papaconstantinou/Talbot 2009).

Areas that have been less studied are the early Middle Ages (although Shahar 1990, Orme 2001 and Classen 2005 have some on this), and the early Islamic period, with its influence in early and high medieval Europe (to my knowledge very little).

Several of the contributions are characterized by the use of a variety of methods and approaches, with scholars employing methodologies from history, social sciences, archaeology, and art history.

Positioning the project within research

As can be seen from this, there has been made considerable progress within research on early childhood, especially during the last decade. Future research, my own project included, will obviously profit much from building on the work done so far: new insights have been reached, and methods and approaches have been applied in ways that have proven fruitful indeed.

A particularly important result of research has been to overcome much of the “adult bias” towards the sources. Whereas earlier studies of the ancient material focussed on issues such as gender, social relations and ethnicity – crucial issues per se! – but to the neglect of the category of age, recent research has managed to put the topic of childhood firmly on the scholarly agenda. In addition, the interdisciplinary nature of much of the research has also been very important.

Still, there are within this field of research some marked gaps which clearly need to be bridged. In my project, I will develop upon earlier studies, but in particular address aspects and areas that so far have not been sufficiently or only very little dealt with. This pertains both to the methodology which will be applied and to the sources that will be studied.

My own research within the field began with my doctoral thesis, in which I dealt with the the apostle Paul's ideas of Christians as siblings and a family of God (Aasgaard 2004). From 2003-2006 I had a post doctoral project funded by the Norwegian Research

Council; in this, I particularly focused on children in the earliest Christian centuries. A central outcome of this was my monograph on the apocryphal *Infancy gospel of Thomas* (Aasgaard 2009). Also in the years after, from 2009 as professor within the History of ideas, I have pursued my interest in this, but in relation to other material.

In the present project, I want to make use of the competence and networks that I have developed during the years. The project will partly expand on fields that I am already fairly familiar with, but partly also deal with much material that will be new to me. From the Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo, I was happy to be supplied with a ph.d. student who (from January 2013) will work on parts of the infancy gospel material. This ph.d. project will form an integrated part of the bigger project that I am applying for here.

Methodology

As for methodology, a main approach will be to study the material with a conscious *view to children*. This will primarily be done in two ways: by approaching the sources with an eye to what they – explicitly or implicitly – convey about children’s lives and childhood as a stage of life, and by looking for traces, “voices”, of the children themselves in the sources. As noted above, the former has become a common approach within modern research. Still there are many important sources that has yet to be investigated (see below).

The latter approach, to search for sources that reflect or document the lives of the children themselves, has to a very little degree been developed on within earlier scholarship, and only in unsystematic and fragmentary manners. Not surprisingly, such an approach has been regarded as problematic, partly because of the limited amount of material, and partly because the “voices” of the children themselves, i.e. their activities, experiences, perceptions etc., have been considered inaudible, i.e. inaccessible.

Such objections do of course pose serious challenges. Nevertheless, such an approach is in my opinion clearly viable: on a closer look, the remains of children’s life and “culture” can turn out to be much richer than previously assumed. Recent research has for example brought forth much new material that can be related to children. This is particularly the case if all kinds of sources are taken into consideration (written, artistic, archaeological etc.). In fact, such material has so far not been systematically collected or assessed. This, however, will be an important element within the project. In a couple of my works, I have tried to develop ways to get on the trail of such remains (Horn/Phenix 2009; Aasgaard 2009). Such a methodology can clearly be taken further and tested on more of the ancient material.

Second, the project will pay attention to how childhood is presented in sources which touch upon it in more *indirect* ways, for example by making use of metaphors from the domain of childhood, or by presenting children as some kind of ideal beings or the opposite. Examples of this are Augustus’ emphasis on children and childbearing in the early Empire, and the Christian focus on believers as children of God. Both these are instances of an ideological use of children and childhood. Analyses of such language can help us not only uncover ancient (more or less adequate) notions about children, but also serve as heuristic tools for insight into family life and society at large, with their hierarchies, power relations, and values.

Third, we shall be particularly attentive to *diachronic* perspectives. A central insight within the history of ideas is that attitudes and ideas related to family, family patterns and internal relationships (parents/children, siblings etc.) only change very slowly, usually far slower than other social factors, whether economic or even cultural; still, they are not unrelated to changes in society at large. By dealing with sources from a long period of time, we may be able to discern elements of both continuity and change, and also to reflect on the background and implications of the developments taking place. This is a matter which has been taken up in some contexts (e.g. Bakke 2005), but which need more consideration and discussion.

Finally, perceptions of *gender* will also be central within the project. The sources are strongly coloured by concerns related to gender. Most of the works were produced by males and reflect male interests. In many of the relevant sources, however, both male and female figures – i.e. both boys and girls – have central positions, and their roles are very much assigned according to common constructions of gender. This is an aspect that has been extensively dealt with in earlier research on ancient childhood, and there will be little new on this in the project. However, in some of the material male and female figures are more sharply and directly juxtaposed than what is common in other sources (cf. *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*).

Sources

Obviously, the material that can be studied from the perspectives above is vast. Within the framework of the project it is necessary to narrow it down to a realistic scale. There are in particular three types of sources that will be dealt with. They are of quite different and fairly unrelated kinds, but complement one another and can each in their way throw light on children and childhood in the ancient world, and thus contribute to a more multifaceted and adequate view of the matter. (For the outcome of research on these three fields, see point 4 below.)

(1) The first type of material is late antique and early medieval stories about the childhood of Jesus and his mother Mary, primarily the so-called apocryphal infancy gospels. The *Infancy gospel of Thomas*, which has been central in my own research, can serve as an apt example (Aasgaard 2009; also Burke 2011). This formerly little-studied 2nd century story about Jesus as a child, which was popular way up into the Middle Ages, has within scholarship almost exclusively been regarded as banal and uninteresting, and often seen as theologically heretical.

In my view, such interpretations are clearly unjustified. Instead, the story should be seen as forming part of the cultural heritage of late antique “common people”. The gospel, which is preserved in many variants and in several early European languages (Greek, Latin, Irish, German, Slavonic etc.) depicts Jesus’ childhood in ways that appear very realistic as concerns the everyday life of children. In fact, if studied with a view to children, removed from an adult bias, the story emerges as a straightforward children’s tale and in many ways well adapted to their level of understanding. This story cycle is even reflected in the Quran and in an *Arabic infancy gospel*; this too is material in high need of being studied more closely.

The *Infancy gospel of Thomas* has a 2nd century parallel in the *Protevangelium of James* which deals with the childhood and youth of Mary (see Hock 1995). In the 7th century these two gospels were combined to form the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*.

Studying this gospel from a combined childhood/gender perspective has to my knowledge not been done and will be of much interest, not least due to the prototypical status of Jesus and Mary then and in later history. This material is also interesting since parts of it clearly reflect material from the lower social strata in late antiquity.

(2) The second type of sources mainly has its setting on higher social levels in antiquity and medieval times, viz. in the cultural and religious elites. These consist primarily of literary sources that often have been considered milestones or at least central in the development of European culture. Many of them have been studied extensively, but not much or not at all with a view to children. Although many of them do not deal explicitly with children, they often have an interest in formation (“Bildung”) and human development, and often make use of metaphors taken from the domain of childhood. In this way, they reflect and also mediate ideas about childhood and about children as human beings. Studying these sources will be of special interest in a diachronic perspective, for example as concerns continuity and change in attitudes toward children.

Within the project only a few select sources of this kind can be dealt with, and primarily within a limited format (articles). Examples of such material from a classical Greek context are Plato and Aristotle, from Hellenistic and early Roman times Plutarch, Philo and Galen, from the Latin world/Roman period the writings of Cicero and Pliny the Younger. The earliest Christian sources, particularly the Biblical writings (Bunge 2008) are among the more studied, as are also a few of the later sources (John Chrysostom, Augustine). However, there are other texts which have been little dealt with, but which deserve closer scrutiny, not least because of their longstanding popularity. Examples are early martyr stories and apocryphal acts of the apostles (2nd-6th c.). Some of the minor church fathers of the 3rd-6th centuries, both in the East and the West, can also prove to be rewarding. Moreover, to study some later material, for example from early scholastic times is also likely to be profitable, e.g. Peter Abelard’s writings, which also include a poem for his young son (12th c.): The period was very much characterised by the merging of intellectual traditions from Greco-Roman antiquity and from early Christianity.

(3) The third type of sources will be of a more varied character both as concerns genre and social setting. Many of them have been little studied with a view to children, but can probably yield material of much interest, particularly as concerns traces of real children’s lives and experiences. Here, the material will have to be limited to a shorter period, primarily 1st century BCE to ca. 6th century CE. Examples of material will be ancient rímarols and fairytales (e.g. Aesop’s fables), non-literary writings (school exercises, papyri letters from children to parents), inscriptions (graffiti, drawings), toys and clothes, children’s graves (epitaphs), and ancient depictions of children reflecting both everyday and more ceremonial activities (sculpture, paintings, reliefs).

This part of the project will more than the other involve contributions by scholars from a variety of disciplines, such as classical philology, archaeology, folkloristics, medicine, papyrology, art history and ancient medicine. It will possibly be of a more experimental nature, but with considerable potential for new insights. To what extent will such a broad spectre of approaches through joint efforts be able to unveil central aspects of the lives of children in this period of antiquity? What picture can it yield of their everyday life? Of their relations to their family? Of what they were taught? Of how they adapted to their environment? Can we find evidence of some kind of a children’s “culture”, e.g. of what they were occupied with, interested in or believed in? Will it be

possible to recognise some tiny but still audible voices from a distant yet important period of the past?

Project management

(1) *Administration.* As leader of the project, I shall be responsible for the general planning, co-ordination, and accomplishment of it, and its economy. It will, however, be necessary with administrative support to handle matters on a daily basis (project secretary, 20%), for example in connection with conferences and publications.

(2) *Organisation.* A core group, consisting of leader, two Ph.D. students, the post doctoral student and two other appointed members, will be responsible for the program planning (conferences, activities, publications). The group is to be established at the beginning of the project. It will meet 2-4 times annually, depending on need. In addition, there will be a broader group of participants, national and international, who take regularly part in the main conferences by giving papers and responses (10-15).

(3) *Conferences and workshops.* These will be the central means to secure the progress and accomplishment of the project, particularly the edited books. Conferences will be held annually, consisting of 15-20 participants, usually lasting 2-3 days. Here, scholars will be invited to present papers on their field of expertise and related to the main topic of each conference. Workshops, with members of the core group and occasionally other contributors, must also be held once or twice annually, depending on need.

(4) *Post doctoral and Ph.D. projects.* There will be one post doctoral and two Ph.D. students within the project (one funded by the Faculty of Humanities). It will be convenient if their projects focus on different fields within the project. However, this is not a requirement; their specific research topics must be decided by balancing the interests of the project and of the applicants.

Networking

An important part of the project will be the building of networks. As far as possible, I will make use of my present Norwegian and international contacts, and expand on these. Through these groups and conferences I have contacts with a large number of people, such as classical scholars, Biblical scholars, archaeologists, art historians and experts in ancient medicine and in various ancient languages. It will be possible for the post doctoral and ph.d. students to participate and also present papers in these settings.

International networks:

1. Society of Biblical Literature Group: Children in the Biblical World (convene annually with seminars at a conference in the USA). I am a member of the steering committee, which in addition consist of persons from USA and UK. From 2011 this large conference will convene with the American Academy of Religion (AAR), another big scholarly organisation.
2. Society of Biblical Literature Group: Children and Families in the Ancient World (convene annually with seminars at a conference outside the USA). This is a parallel group which is mainly based in Europe. I am a member of the steering committee,

and serve as a link between the two groups. The other committee members come from Belgium, Sweden and Norway.

3. Association pour l'étude de la littérature apocryphe chrétienne (AELAC) is a network of scholars working on the New Testament apocryphal writings. They meet annually for a conference in Dole, France. I am an ordinary member of the network.
4. Nordic Network for The Religious Roots of Europe (Dynamics in the Formation and Transformation of Judaism, Christianity and Islam). This is a network which organises occasional seminars and study trips for ph.d. students. It has its administrative base in Aarhus, Denmark.
5. Collegium Patristicum Lundense (CPL). This is a Nordic network of scholars particularly interested in patristic studies (early Christianity). Seminars and workshops are regularly arranged in Lund, Sweden.
6. Oxford Patristics Conference. Big conference arranged every four years in Oxford. I participate regularly.
7. In addition to this, I also have contact with other individual scholars with an interest in ancient childhood: in Denmark, Italy and Greece.

Norwegian network:

1. Quite a number of Norwegian scholars have been working on issues related to ancient childhood – there is a comparatively strong competence on this in Norway. The most important are: Odd Magne Bakke (MHS), Karl Olav Sandnes (MF), Tor Vegge (UiA), Inger Marie Lindboe (HiO). I have worked together with them in various contexts.
2. At the Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo (IFIKK, IKOS, IAKH) I have been in contact with a number of people who are willing to contribute with book chapters and/or conference papers/responses: Christine Amadou, Nora Eggen, Trond Berg Eriksen, Jan-Erik Ebbestad Hansen, Ellen Krefting, Lena Liepe, Øyvind Rabbås, Nora Stene, and Jan Schumacher (MF). Thus, this will here also be a potential of involving scholars from different scholarly fields from my own institution.

3. Central perspectives

As for the relevance for society of the project, this is briefly dealt with in the introductory paragraphs of the project description. There are no special issues related to environmental or ethical matters. As for gender, such concerns are reflected in the project description.

4. Results: Communication and publications

The expected results of the project will be one post doc./ph.d. thesis and one publication of monograph size within each of the three main areas of research.

Main publications (preliminary titles!)

1. Monograph (English): *Little Jesus: The development of tales about Christ's birth and childhood in early European culture*. Ca. 200-250 pp. This is meant to be my main contribution within the project (this point is under revision).
2. Edited book (English): *Tiny voices from the past: Retrieving childhood in early Europe*. 300-400 pp. The book is to be a collaborative work of many scholars. It is to be illustrated, and consist of (1) a broad spectrum of documentation of material "retrieved" from children's life, such as clothes, furniture, utensils, toys, games, burial customs etc., (2) discussion and assessments of the material, (3) reflections on methodologies and approaches applied. I will have the responsibility for the introduction and one chapter.
3. Edited book (English): *Children and Childhood in the history of thought*. 300-400 pp. The book is to be a collaborative work of many scholars, dealing with texts/authors related to their special research areas. The time span of the book will be from classical Greece until the high Middle Ages, but also with a few contribution going up to our own times, and will also contain discussions and reflections on the present relevance of the material. I will have the responsibility for the introduction and one chapter.
4. Two Ph.D. theses on relevant topics, one post doctoral project resulting in a scientific monograph.
5. Teaching and tuition. University course on Childhood in the History of ideas. If possible, 1-3 master theses related to the project topic.

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