

# CHILDREN AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE ROMAN AND LATE ANTIQUITY WORLD



EDITED BY  
CHRISTIAN LAES AND  
VILLE VUOLANTO

ROUTLEDGE

# **Children and Everyday Life in the Roman and Late Antique World**

**Edited by Christian Laes  
and Ville Vuolanto**

First published 2017  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN  
and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2017 selection and editorial matter, Christian Laes and Ville Vuolanto;  
individual chapters, the contributors

The right of the editors to be identified as the author of the editorial material,  
and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted in  
accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents  
Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or  
utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now  
known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in  
any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing  
from the publishers.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or  
registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation  
without intent to infringe.

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Laes, Christian, editor of compilation. | Vuolanto, Ville, editor of  
compilation.

Title: Children and everyday life in the Roman and late antique world /  
edited by Christian Laes and Ville Vuolanto.

Description: Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge,  
2016. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016019195 | ISBN 9781472464804 (hardback : alkaline  
paper) | ISBN 9781315568942 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Children--Rome--History. | Children--Rome--Social life  
and customs. | Children--Rome--Social conditions. | Rome--Social life and  
customs. | Rome--Social conditions.

Classification: LCC DG91 .C47 2016 | DDC 305.230937--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016019195>

ISBN: 978-1-4724-6480-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-56894-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman  
by HWA Text and Data Management, London

## 2 Experience, agency, and the children in the past

### The case of Roman childhood

*Ville Vuolanto*

The concepts of experience and agency have become central to the study of children by social scientists in modern childhood studies. Since these concepts have also started to appear in the writings of historians of childhood, it is necessary to reflect on their meaningfulness for the study of ancient children. What is actually being studied when we claim to study the agency and experience of children? The aim of the first part of the present chapter is to give an overview of the research into children's experience and agency, and of the methodological problems in the study of Roman childhood in the context of modern childhood studies. The rest of the chapter deals with the usefulness of the concepts of 'agency' and 'experience' in studying the history of ancient childhood, with the help of two very different kinds of examples. The first is drawn from the autobiographical narrative of Theodoret of Cyrrhus, from the mid-fifth century CE Roman Syria, which represents a common situation in writing ancient childhood history: a text written by an older man, in which childhood is only one more tool for arguing his point in ongoing discussions on authority. The other example is a second- or third-century papyrus letter by Theon to his homonymous father, a very rare example of a text written by a child, probably in his early teens.

#### **Modern childhood studies and the Roman childhood**

In modern family studies, one is able to recognize, very roughly, three different phases in relation to the study of childhood and children. In the first phase, children were understood to be worthy of study as objects of adult interest, especially in the contexts of education and legal status. Childhood was looked at as a fixed and separate period in a human life course, both preparatory and anticipatory as such – this approach dominated the scattered studies on children until the 1960s. Here, the influence of Philip Ariès and the idea of the historical embeddedness of childhood was essential: childhood is (also) socially constructed. However, one may claim that modern childhood studies really began only with the next phase of research, through the development of the idea of childhood socialization. The continuity of a community depends not only on its biological and economic survival but also on the transmission of its cultural and social norms and customs while learning processes of inheriting norms, behaviour, and ideologies provide the individuals

with the skills and ways of acting that are necessary for participation in their own society. This idea of a double process of socialisation was already central in the work of George Herbert Mead in the 1920s, but it was only after the Second World War, and especially in the 1970s and 1980s, that the study of childhood socialization became the way of studying childhood in the field of social studies.<sup>1</sup>

From the late 1980s onwards, this way of approaching children in childhood studies has been much criticized on the grounds that there is a danger of seeing children solely as passive objects of various socializing forces. Socialization would be too easily understood as principally a process through which a child becomes a non-child, a member of the adult world. Thus, in recent studies on modern childhood, the stress has shifted from childhood socialization to a third phase of studies, with its starting point in agency-based theories. The claim is that children have an active role in their growing and learning processes, transforming and renewing the cultural heritage they were born into.<sup>2</sup> It must, however, be noted, that the concept of socialization as such does require us to subscribe to a deterministic view of childhood which would deny the possible agency of children.<sup>3</sup>

Four basic assumptions underlying this new wave in childhood studies in the social sciences can be identified.<sup>4</sup> First, childhood and ‘child’ should be approached as socially constructed and culturally conditioned notions. The necessary stress on the constructive elements of childhood makes it important to historicize childhood – even for the social scientists. Second, age, and thus also childhood, should be seen as a variable of social analysis just like class, health, gender, or ethnicity. Childhood, when it starts and when it ends, and the cultural connotations and practices relevant to childhood, are defined differently in different historical periods, in different cultural spheres, and by different social groups. Third, therefore, childhood, children’s social relationships and children’s culture are worthy of study in their own right – not because children will one day become adults. In all, fourth, children should be seen as active in constructing and experiencing their own lives.

As the brief historiographical survey in the introduction to this volume shows, this new paradigm of childhood studies has had scant influence on writing about ancient, or more specifically Roman, children and childhood. Attention has seldom been paid to children’s agency and everyday life or to Roman children’s experiences. Modern studies of ancient childhood began as the history of education. The roots of this approach go back to the nineteenth century and to the establishing of national educational systems and the need to find old examples and new viewpoints. However, such studies up to now have concentrated mainly on normative aspects, on how children (ideally) would be brought up, rarely exploring the history of everyday life and mentalities, and they still form a somewhat differentiated field of study.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, most of the other studies on ancient childhood have been preoccupied with discussions of *le sentiment de l’enfance* and parental love, in response to the claims of Philippe Ariès and, later, especially of Lloyd deMause. Although studies from the 1980s onward, drawing on women’s history and demography, have widened the field of study and raised new questions and themes, the discussions initiated by Ariès still provided the framework for research, which has focused on showing that even if childhood is culturally conditioned and a

potentially changing category, the history of families cannot be written as a long story of unloving and frigid family relations, which gradually evolved into caring and loving parenthood during the modern era.<sup>6</sup> It is obvious that these questions and themes took parents and their perspective on children and childhood, not children themselves, as their starting point.

### **Methodological challenges to the ancient historians**

Why has the shift from the adult perspective to children's own experience been so difficult to achieve? It can be claimed that ancient historians lack the necessary sources: the genuine motives and experiences of children cannot be found. There are no interviews or diaries to use, and direct signs about agency, such as a variety of toys or children's own writings and drawings, are rarely if ever available. Since even the voice of the common people is barely audible, how can we hear the voice of children?

Nevertheless, the questions and viewpoints derived from the modern approaches can be useful: concepts such as socialization, agency, experience and children's culture direct the gaze of the historian to other kinds of social processes and questions than were previously studied. How did children use their time? What did they do, and with whom did they interact? One could also study parent-child relations from the point of view of the children – for example, one may wonder, why nobody has dared to ask if Roman children had the courage to invest emotionally in their parents, given that they saw so many of their peers become orphans?<sup>7</sup>

The change in perspective is all the more needed, since at present not only ancient historians but scholars of the past cultures more generally seem to speak somewhat intuitively and unreflectively about childhood and children's history. This can be overcome only by carefully defining the words, concepts and approaches taken. The basic requirement is that normative statements should not be confused with depictions of everyday attitudes or with social history. As Paula Fass stresses in the introduction to a recent volume, family affection and experience should not be confused with expressions of family affection and experience. The emotional expressions that are regarded as legitimate change over the course of history. Besides this, we are often at the mercy of differing intellectual traditions if we are not aware of them: a Roman scholar, a scholar of early Christianity, a medieval scholar, or a sociologist, all reflect on the past from their own perspectives. A multidisciplinary discussion, presentation, or volume does not guarantee an interdisciplinary view of the subject.<sup>8</sup>

It is, however, much more difficult to evade a tendency to think about childhood in the terms of our own experience – which we understand as the natural order of things. In particular, there is a danger in defining 'child' through modern ideas about the development child, thereby universalizing ideas about the age of children. What are we to think about the Roman elite marriages, or the marriages of the Byzantine, Renaissance or Muslim elites, involving girls between the ages of twelve and fourteen (like Shakespeare's Juliet)? What would have been the difference between abusive child labour and everyday child work in the households? Thus, for example, instead of taking an *a priori* definition of a child as being of one particular age, it

would be more fruitful to see how children or ‘childish behaviour’ was defined in the contemporary contexts, and who is already considered to be a grown-up – and why.

To sum up, when we study children – not merely adult views about childhood – we should view childhood as a performative phase of life. A focus on the physical and psychological immaturity and development, which are based on a shared human biology, does not suffice to define ‘a child’ (although this biological and ‘bodily’ base for childhood would inevitably play its part in these definitions)<sup>9</sup>: children become children by their own repeated acts and social interaction, the exact nature of which depends not only on biology and individual characteristics but also on social conventions and cultural contexts. This idea of performative childhood focuses research on the activities of the children and their ways of adapting to certain culturally and socially conditioned environments. From this viewpoint, childhood socialization cannot be understood as the set of activities through which children are taught to function in their society. The emphasis would lie rather on extra-educational impulses, and on the children’s own initiative.<sup>10</sup> At any given time at least a third of the population consisted of children, who shared in a children’s culture. This means that the potential influence of childhood experiences on an individual cannot be underestimated.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, viewing childhood as a preparation period for taking part in the adult culture is by no means the same as viewing it as a period of participating in children’s own culture, which is worthy of study on its own merits. Children, as individuals, certainly do change and the way they are looked at is constantly shifting – but the point of comparison does not need to be adulthood, nor does research need to restrict itself to the processes through which children grow up towards adulthood.

### **The case of Theodoret of Cyrrhus: grapes, and the nearness of the ascetics**

In what follows, my aim is to clarify by means of a very short and simple example the methodological problems and promises involved in studying agency and experience of (late) Roman childhood. The text consists of only two sentences taken from the biographies of the Syrian ascetics in the *Religious History* by Theodoret of Cyrrhus, from the 440s CE – but the actual event described had taken place some forty years earlier:

Often, when he [i.e. Peter the Galatian] had asked me to sit on his knee, he gave me grapes and bread. Indeed, my mother, who had experienced his spiritual grace, sent me once a week to reap the harvest of his blessing.<sup>12</sup>

In the middle of his discourse on the life and deeds of a local ascetic, Peter the Galatian, who lived in the mountains near Antioch, Theodoret writes himself into the narrative. First, Peter explains why Theodoret, who is still a boy or a young man, cannot become his disciple, ‘as his parents love him too much’ to let him devote himself to the ascetic lifestyle away from his family. Theodoret wanted to attach himself with the ascetics and explain why he himself did not become one of them. This was done by referring to one of the most generally accepted ancient

virtues, the dutiful and affectionate relationship between a parent and a child. He was so dear to his parents, that he, as a dutiful and obedient son, could not (yet!) act against his parents – but he allows his readers to think that later, when his parents had died, he could follow his calling.

However, after this introduction of the setting and his filial duties, he gives details of his relationship with the ascetics, and here with Peter. Theodoret starts ‘from the beginning’ – with his first writing about his initial encounters with the ascetic figures as a child, and gives a brief account of his experiences. Although we cannot know for sure if this idyllic recollection represents any actual events, the scene with its homely nearness is a perfect example of how a child would end up with a positive view of a certain lifestyle and values.

In analysing the narrated incident and its rhetorical strategies, one must be aware of the genre in question: autobiographical writings employ elaborate discourses with a variety of narrative strategies for self-promotion. It was influenced by three interlinked aims which would have taken precedence over any truth claims or unmasking of the self: the ancient autobiography was preoccupied with the preservation of memory, with portraying oneself as an exemplary figure, and with justifying some quite precise deeds or thought systems. Moreover, ancient autobiography was not preoccupied with any ‘development’ of character, but about the depiction of the life as a perfected whole and as revealing the unchangeable ‘real character’ of an individual. In Roman autobiographical writings, there is a continuum of anecdotes from consisting of possibly first-hand experience to the invented exemplary stories using the author himself and his family members as the protagonists.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, these texts require a reading which pays attention to themes and ideas the writers themselves had taken for granted, and which often serve only as a background for their actual argumentation, which is directed towards other ends. Although we may question the exact relationship between these stories and the actual living conditions of the specific children they are supposed to refer to, they must necessarily depict a childhood which has relevance to the intended audience. It would, however, be pointless to make any specific psychohistorical analyses, for example, on the basis of Augustine’s depiction of his childhood: but his text could be a reliable source for seeing what kinds of forces an adult late-antique elite male saw at play during childhood.

But how are we to study the experience of childhood? What do we actually mean by this concept? If everything done by any person is categorized by ‘agency’, the category becomes vacuous and devoid of analytical importance (although this would not prevent its being used for rhetorical purposes, to give the impression that the scholar is informed about the recent trends in social sciences).<sup>14</sup> We need an analytical definition, to see if the concept of agency indeed helps us to study the past and to discern what it means to postulate the ‘agency’ of a person?

## **Experience experienced and narrated**

The word ‘experience’ refers to two rather different sets of ideas: knowledge or lessons gained from past events (e.g. when we say that someone is ‘an experienced



person'), or consciousness or awareness of something, by sensing, feeling or thought. This is experience as subjective feeling (for instance, referring to something as 'a great experience'). Second, one must be careful to keep separate the individual experience and, on the other hand, the meanings given to this experience. A simple example: what we have experienced as children is a past thing – but if we talk about it, it is transformed into an experience reflected upon and brought to the present. Thus, experience is a changing thing, reconstructed in our daily lives. Experience that can be studied is always something which is already told, spoken about, and thus constructed.<sup>15</sup> These two points lead to a third point: individual, reflected, even shared experience versus a common experience (which may also be called a generational experience – such as asking 'what was it like to be at school in the 1980s?'). If we confuse these approaches, there is a danger of essentialism: as if there were 'a childhood' that is, a more or less universal and shared 'one certain' childhood to be experienced.<sup>16</sup>

Let us return to Theodoret. He claims to have experienced a certain repetitive event in his early life before he was a teenager. We have no way of ascertaining this – we have only his own words. Moreover, he does not even reflect further upon his experience – no emotions are referred to, and we learn nothing of the significance of these visits. On the other hand, we know that Theodoret consciously presented himself both as a son of a pious mother and as a spiritual son of the holy ascetics, trying to construct himself as a person of special authority against this double background (to back up his claim to a pure tradition) for the mid-fifth-century theological struggles.<sup>17</sup>

Where is the experience here? Let us assume that we can indeed trust him: how can we try to reconstruct something like the experience of childhood on the basis of individual, anecdotal evidence? And, what does 'experience' mean for us? Would reality be something that just 'happens' to an individual with direct experience (and a cognitive scientist may ask whether a direct experience would even be possible); or would it rather be something that people, in any case, construct by giving their own meanings to their 'experiences' in social and cultural contexts and contacts? If we opt for the latter view, as we think we should,<sup>18</sup> what is important must not be what has been told, but the fact that it has been told, and it is told in a certain, culturally sanctioned way. In other words, we should ask why this kind of anecdote was recorded in the first place: why the ancient texts mention those incidents which we categorize as referring to a certain experience. As Aldous Huxley claims: 'Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him'. After all, it is an interpretation of experience that needs an explanation.<sup>19</sup>

## **Defining agency**

Agency can denote human freedom in the sense of 'free will' (against the view that human actions are predetermined by structures). This, naturally, poses the basic philosophical problem in all the human sciences: how much are people bound by their environment, that is, by history and society, and how much they can shape by their own action these very same constraints? Agency in the course of a life has sometimes been defined as a capacity to act meaningfully and to exert influence on

one's life within personal constraints in a given temporally-constructed situation.<sup>20</sup> The idea of autonomous action has aroused criticism, especially because this position is individualistic. Rather than stressing individual competence and strategic planning in agency, which would reserve real agency to narrower and more privileged groups of people (also of children), it would be more fruitful to take 'social modes' of agency as our point of departure: agency, here understood as a capacity to act purposively and make a difference, takes place on social networks and in structures of power; it is always 'in-between and interstitial', as David Oswell points out.<sup>21</sup>

It has also been argued that a sense, or an appreciation, of this kind of effect, should itself be understood as agency. Thus, agency would include the individual sense of control and achievement, the experience that it is possible to have an influence on one's life and on the future, and often an element of planning. This sense of making an impact on the world would be dangerously weakened if a person were left without any positive feedback. This means that social support is an important element of agency. The sense of being an agent is strongly dependent on the dimensions of futurity and hope.<sup>22</sup>

According to the useful categorisation by Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, the practice of agency is determined by past patterns of action, or, more generally, by the presence of past experiences (sense/feeling, remembrance, anticipation), and communicative interaction (socialization), which together constitute one's identity. Second, future 'projective experience' and emotions are present: hopes, fears, desires; and third, there is the practical evaluation of the present situation. Agency is 'always agency *towards* something', a means of entering into a relationship with surrounding persons, places, meanings, and events.<sup>23</sup> There are inevitably great differences between children in the forms which agency would take in particular different historical contexts, because of personal characteristics, family environment, dominant social structures, and prevalent age, status, health and gender roles.<sup>24</sup>

A child who has agency is an interactive child, with a sense of having influence, and of being able to make a difference. To be an agent is to be able to take the initiative, to be creative – but this creativeness does not need to be spectacular since it takes place in everyday life: agency is not present only when acting in contrast to social expectations, but also in the reproduction of social norms.<sup>25</sup> To analyse children's agency need not to mean finding 'great deeds' or heroism in the lives of children.<sup>26</sup> In general, however, agency denotes the possibility of change. The problem for a historian is, of course, that behaviour seemingly totally in line with social expectations can still represent agency, since we cannot observe the processes of decision-making and the 'sense of social action' that may be involved.

What, then, is the relationship between experience and agency? The theoretical framework adopted by social interactionism is useful here. As Herbert Blumer stresses, we

must recognize that the activity of human beings consists of meeting a flow of situations in which they have to act and that their action is built on the basis of what they note, how they assess and interpret what they note, and what kind of projected lines of action they map out.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, agency involves interpretation of and reflection on the reality of the environment one is exposed to, even if it is not an immediate reaction to it. When studying agency, we must identify the meanings people give to their environment and to people and phenomena they interact with – studying agency is, from this perspective, the study of narrated experience. Since these meanings are individual, contextual and localized, ‘people may be living side by side yet be living in different worlds’.<sup>28</sup> However, the interpretation process itself, and its meaningfulness for an individual are necessarily informed by social interaction in general. Thus, agency is built on individual experiences as interpreted in social contexts.

The perspective of agency presents individuals at the crossroads of the external pressures and their own – culturally conditioned – intentions and choices: to have agency means that an individual has a sense of having the means to influence the course of one’s own life (and thus the world) within the opportunities and constraints provided by history and social circumstances. However, social and cultural factors not only play a role in limiting the boundaries of action and ‘accepted’ behaviour for achieving goals; they also affect these goals – and provide a field for the acting itself. Moreover, the actual goals – the towards-aspect of agency – may be of low visibility both for the actors themselves and for the scholar, and even the actors’ explanations of their goals should not be taken for granted *a priori*.

### **Theodoret the boy and Theodoret the story-teller**

When we come to the case related by Theodoret, we have very little information about the situation of the protagonist, the boy Theodoret. However, even if he is sent to see the ascetic by his mother, he is there on his own; his mother trusts him to actually go where his mother urges him and to find the way by himself in due time (at least before night-fall). He is to receive the blessing of the hermit – he achieves this, and he is also given grapes and bread.<sup>29</sup> This may not be extremely innovative, but he is certainly in control of many aspects of his own quest, and interacts with his surroundings and with the other people mentioned (his mother, the ascetic). But even if the story as such is intended to convey a certain emotional message for the readers, he does not refer to any emotions, nor does he comment on any practical issues involved in getting to see the ascetic.

Historians need to accept the limits of their knowledge. We cannot know how an individual experienced a situation and what motivations and intentions he or she had. Accordingly, the historian should pay attention to ‘the composition and decomposition of the interpretative dispositions that inevitably frame historical agency’.<sup>30</sup> If the question is not what an agent’s degree of liberty is, but what conditions have allowed ‘a given social context to generate a particular modality of practice or course of action’,<sup>31</sup> actions as expressions of their social contexts can be used to reconstruct that context. Here, we are dealing not only with a certain ‘modality of practice’, but also with a culturally shared discourse, which tended to emphasize and combine childhood, individual choosing, the mother’s influence, and the accumulation of authority.<sup>32</sup>

For the ancient historian, the precious information is that Theodoret's aim of presenting himself as an inheritor of the ascetic monks leads him to refer to his own childhood, giving us an anecdote of homely intimacy, as he sits on the lap of a father figure.<sup>33</sup> His contemporaries must have found this recognizable, referring to an expectation of a shared experience, and certain modes of agency that needed no further explanation for his intended audience. Otherwise, it would have been futile to try to use this kind of story to promote a message of intimate links with ascetic Christianity. We thus reach the paradoxical conclusion that, as a discursive act, the story by Theodoret may tell us more about the possible limits of childhood agency, the experience of nearness, the shaping of identity, and the transfer of the tradition in a certain historical context, than if we (by some miraculous way) could know how he, as an individual, actually managed to pay these visits and how he experienced and actually remembered them in the early fifth century. A speculative story, with a point on what plausibly could have been the case, might be more useful than a historically 'accurate' anecdote, even for a social historian.<sup>34</sup>

The contextualization of the stories related to everyday life of the children would be one way of collecting information on children's history – even if these were told by middle-aged men decades later, propagating their own ideas and ideals. We are left with the bare bones of agency and an outsider's view of experience: what kinds of circumstances the protagonists of our historical study encountered and experienced. In most cases, therefore, it seems futile to try to reconstruct any actual agency or experiences of the historical subjects. Instead, we might be able to reconstruct the world which was to be experienced. Moreover, as Mary Jo Maynes points out, narratives of childhood of this kind can be very telling, not as direct evidence of the experience of children, 'but rather as sources of insights into the impact and meanings of childhood, and of childhood as a phase of the construction of agency and subjectivity'.<sup>35</sup> It is from his childhood that Theodoret seeks to draw the arguments for his (public) identity as an ascetical and unwavering orthodox bishop.

### **A rare case: letter of Theon, the angry boy**

The case depicted above is a representative example of the challenges involved in finding children's experience and agency from the late Roman sources, but the case with which I end my discussion is quite exceptional in the context of Roman history. It is a papyrus letter by a Roman Egyptian boy presumably in his early teens, written in his own hand to his father. As far as I am aware, only two other children's letters from Antiquity have been preserved.<sup>36</sup>

Theon to his father Theon greetings. It was so nice of you not to take me with you to the city. If you refuse to take me with you to Alexandria I won't write you a letter or speak to you or wish you good health. So, if you go to Alexandria I won't take your hand or greet you ever again. If you refuse to take me, this is what will happen. And my mother said to Archelaos, 'He's upsetting me, take him away!' It was so nice of you, sending me these great

presents, just rubbish.<sup>37</sup> They put me off the track on the 12th, the day when you sailed. Well then, send for me, I beg you. If you don't, I won't eat, I won't drink; there! I pray for your health. Tybi 18th.

Deliver to Theon from Theonas his son.<sup>38</sup>

We have here a boy whose father does not want to take him to the big world, to the second biggest city of the Roman empire, Alexandria. The father has left home without informing him to take the boat from the city of Oxyrhynchus further down the Nile.

The text combines nicely two different rhetorical strategies: first, the adult-tone, with recourse to irony with 'so nice of you' and a present of beans. Second, there is the childish-tone, with blackmailing: he won't speak, greet or eat if his hopes are not fulfilled. Moreover, he is able to refer to the words of his mother, thus backing up his claim that he is indeed very disappointed and actively trying to influence the decision-making in the family – most probably, he had pestered his mother to write a letter to his father.

The translation cannot do full justice to the textual characteristics of the original letter: the editors<sup>39</sup> remark that it is '[w]ritten in a rude uncial hand, and its grammar and spelling leave a good deal to be desired'. Still, we have here a child who certainly is privileged compared to most of his peers: he has access to education and he comes from a wealthy family.<sup>40</sup> His father is doing business in Alexandria for a longer period, he himself has access to papyrus to write on – and he took full advantage of his situation. Naturally, to write a letter may have been the idea of Archelaos (perhaps an older relative, or even a teacher) but the wording shows that the ideas presented were the boy's own. The intervention of an adult may be discerned in the formulae of address and conclusion, or else what we see here are the well-embedded cultural conventions. In particular, the shifting tone at the end of the letter is amusing and shows that 'I pray for your health' is there because (and only because) one should end letters with this expression. It is also of interest that at the beginning of the letter he uses his real name, Theon – but when adding the address, he shifted to use his pet name, Theonas.<sup>41</sup>

We have here an example of multi-layered agency by a child: Theon wants to experience Alexandria, he pesters his mother, he writes a letter; he is also proclaiming his agency by greeting or not greeting his father, and – though perhaps not so convincingly – by eating or not eating. Certainly, he presents himself as a subject in his own life. Nevertheless, this is a rhetorical exercise, since he tells what he chooses to about his experiences: he works hard to convince his father of his deep disappointment at the family decision. The interplay of social conventions and his immediate concerns are made visible in an exceptional manner: he is socialized with regard to his 'family culture' rather than with the requirements of the wider cultural discourses. There is little sign of the kind of filial piety which ideally should permeate all interaction between children and their parents. The milieu in which his action takes place is convincingly depicted: a household with his mother and some other people; with freedom to act and to express his opinions and experiences. Perhaps the most interesting point in our

present context is that he seems to think this actually could help. Theon is not an oppressed or frightened child. He is not afraid of losing the emotional support of his nearest and dearest even if he is himself angry and acting irritatingly.

This is an isolated text, and, as noted, nearly unique. No firm conclusions about the 'usual' experiences of childhood or prevalent patterns of family dynamics can be drawn from this kind of anecdotal evidence: it is his own world Theon is experiencing. But it shows what was possible within certain limits, at least in some contexts and in some families.

## Conclusions

In our quest for children's everyday life and experiences in Roman Antiquity we are mostly limited to stories told by the adults, reflecting childhood agency, experience and culture. We can seldom claim with certainty to hear the voices of 'real' children in ancient texts since they have been appropriated to such an extent by adult authors.<sup>42</sup> And when these voices can be heard, the information we gain is often quite anecdotal. When historians talk about 'experience' and 'agency', what they in fact often mean is the frame in which the actual historical experiences (about which we have no information) took place, or the outward 'acts' which the historians take as representing the actual choices made by the individuals as more or less free 'agents'.

It may seem that a child who has agency is a special case of having a childhood experience, but this is true only in a superficial sense. Thus, while it is self-evident that having an experience does not require any outward actions taking place (such as moving your body or speaking), experiencing nevertheless needs processing and interpretation, that is, something that has an effect on the person in question. The world around us is not *existing*, but *happening* to us – as far as we are aware of it. A historian cannot know which features of the individuals' environment are in fact actively experienced, and would, therefore, be reflected in their agency. These experiences are rarely reported (even in more modern times, let alone in Antiquity), they are always processed and narrated, and are thus subject to more or less conscious hindsight, or even to exploitation.

The studies presented in this volume may tell us more about the boundary conditions of childhood agency than about the worlds that children actually experienced. They depict the potential of the human networks with which children of the Roman world could interact, and the cultural and material environment they moved in during their childhood. But, this will give us a glimpse of a mode of thought and action that is arguably characteristic of a particular combination of gender, age, social group, stage of family life course, culture/ethnicity/geographical area, and time: What was the capacity of Roman children (both individually and collectively) 'in making the difference', and what kinds of conditions limited them?<sup>43</sup>

By emphasizing the perspectives of childhood experience and children's agency – what children do, in what circumstances, and with whom – the research may emphasize children's active, intentional, and goal-seeking character. If we add to this perspective the study of the material contexts of childhood, the significance of both

the children's environment and their own biological boundary conditions, the focus of research would shift from the history of childhood towards the history of children, that is, towards a better understanding of children's culture and their everyday life.

## Acknowledgements

I am indebted to many acute and constructive comments in the *History of Ideas Research Seminar* in 2014 and in the *Breakfast Club* workshop in 2015 in Oslo, and to Jari Aro (Tampere) and Christian Laes (Antwerp/Tampere) for their suggestions and encouragement.

## Notes

- 1 Oswell 2013: 9–12, 37–43; Honig 2009; see also Ryan 2008: 563–4, who also points out that already John Locke's ideas fit well into the theories of the developmental socialization of children (p. 569).
- 2 Honig 2009: 65–9; Alanen 1992: 80–90; James and James 2004: 23–7.
- 3 See Katajalla-Peltomaa and Vuolanto 2011: 83–4; Ryan 2008: 563–4, 574.
- 4 On what follows, see James and Prout 1997: esp. 7–10, with Ryan 2008: 555–6 and James and James 2004: 23–7, 37–40. Ryan 2008: esp. 561, 564–6 criticizes those who call this way of doing childhood studies a new 'paradigm', showing that several important studies of children's agency were published earlier.
- 5 On this, see Vössing 2003.
- 6 See Introduction, this volume, pp. 2–3, with further bibliography.
- 7 On this, see also Horn in this volume, p. 313–314.
- 8 Fass 2013: 4 – with a sad example in the same volume: King 2013, writing on Early Christian and Jewish views on childhood, claims that 'the machinery of child slaughter' powered the 'infanticidal' Greco-Roman world, which ignored, exploited, and discarded children – all of which gradually began to change by the rise of Christianity. However, in the same volume, Bradley 2013 argues that there was no great changes in the lives of children or in the attitudes towards them in Christianity, and that children were 'never marginal beings'. For an analysis of research into misconceptions and prejudices about child abandonment and infanticide on the advent of Christianity in Late Antiquity, see Vuolanto 2011.
- 9 See e.g. Oswell 2013: 18–20.
- 10 The idea of performative childhood is derived from Butler 1990 and Laz 1998.
- 11 Cf. a slip in Fass 2013: 'childhood, as it had developed and changed over time in West, has not only affected the experience of almost one half of the population ...'!
- 12 Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Religious History* 9.4 (Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen 1979: 414): Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Religious History* 9.4 (Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen 1979: 414): 'Πολλάκις δέ με τοῖς γόνασιν ἐπικαθίσας σταφυλῇ με καὶ ἄρτω διεθρέψε· πείραν γάρ αὐτοῦ τῆς πνευματικῆς χάριτος ἡ μήτηρ δεξαμένη ἅπαξ με τῆς ἐβδομάδος ἐκάστης τρυγᾶν ἑυλογίαν ἐκείνην τὴν ἐκέλευε.' For the social and cultural contexts and an analysis of the Theodoret's self-narrative, see Vuolanto 2012.
- 13 For the autobiographical character of this story, and further studies on autobiographical writing in Antiquity, see Vuolanto 2013b. More generally on hagiographic texts as essentially fictionalized literature, see Clark 1999: 16–21.
- 14 Critics have also alleged that the focus on children's agency and their 'authentic voices' echoes the 'modern romanticism of personhood', that is, it lays too much stress on individualism. See Ryan 2008: esp. 567–8, Oswell 2013: 15, 264–6.
- 15 See esp. Scott 1991: 793.

- 16 Scott 1991: 791–3.
- 17 For religious authority and Theodoret's self-construction as a living saint, see Vuolanto 2012.
- 18 See also Cabrera 2001: 91.
- 19 Huxley 1932: 5; Scott 1991: 797.
- 20 Hitlin and Elder 2006: 38 with Calhoun 2002 sv. 'agency'. See Oswell 2013: esp. 7, 35, 280, who urges that we should leave behind the agency/structures dichotomy in studying children's agency.
- 21 Valentine 2011; Oswell 2013: 271. This theorisation is strongly influenced by Anthony Giddens and the theory of structuration, highlighting the impossibility of separating structure and agency, and in attributing even to the smallest social actions a possible role in intervening (and thus reproducing or changing) social systems and processes – although without Giddens' stress on rationalization and 'competent members of the society'. See Valentine 2011: 350–51 and Oswell 2013: 46–9 with Giddens 1984: 14–24.
- 22 Oswell 2013: 263–71; Hitlin and Elder 2006: 39–43; Hitlin and Elder 2007: 182–4 with further references. On agency and hope, see Feldman 2013 with further references to empirical psychological research.
- 23 Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 969–73, 994 and 1011. On agency and the construction of individual identity, see also Hitlin and Elder 2007: 179–81, 184, who point out that agency is exercised when the individual is performing her or his identity, while simultaneously modifying it in social interaction.
- 24 See also Valentine 2011 on sociological differences and contexts.
- 25 Oswell 2013: 6–7, 17; Valentine 2011: 355. See also Hitlin and Elder 2007: 181.
- 26 See also Maynes 2008: 115–18. She seems to hold that writing about agency would somehow imply this kind of viewpoint – as if studying the agency of the marginalized and voiceless were an oxymoron. See also Ryan 2008: 567–8 and Valentine 2011: esp. 354–5.
- 27 Blumer 1969: 16.
- 28 Blumer 1969: 11.
- 29 It is possible to see here an allegory of Eucharist with bread, wine from the grapes, and a blessing.
- 30 Smith 2001: 141; See also Scott 1991.
- 31 Cabrera 2001: 97.
- 32 Vuolanto 2015b.
- 33 It must be noted here that Theodoret chooses to attach himself especially to his biological mother – he refers as little as possible to his father. Thus, in his narrative, the nearness to the (male) ascetics takes the place of nearness to father – it was, after all, also due to the prayers of the 'ascetic fathers' that he was himself born, as he claims (see Vuolanto 2012). Theodoret's father is like Joseph, and his mother like Mary – or, alternatively, like a Mother Church – for him. On family metaphors in fourth and fifth century Christianity, see Vuolanto 2015a: 69–80.
- 34 See also De Brigard 2013: 155, a psychologist and philosopher, who concludes that memory is an 'integral part of a larger system which that supports not only thinking of what was the case and what potentially could be the case, but also what could have been the case' (quote from his summary) – thus, in remembering the experiences, it would be more important to be able to formulate possible future events, than to record actual past ones.
- 35 Maynes 2008: 119. See also Scott 1991: 782.
- 36 Another is *SB* III 6262 (Third century, of unknown provenance. For the text, see Aasgaard in this volume, p. 327, with further discussion in Criboire 2001: 112). Here, too, an angry boy is writing a letter to his father. Thonis goes to school away from home, and he complains that the father hardly ever writes to him, and does not pay visits to his son 'to find out whether the teacher pays attention' to the boy or not. At the



- end of the letter, Thonis sends his greetings to his family members and friends, even to teachers back home, wishing his father good health (as was the custom in letters). As a postscript he adds 'Remember my pigeons'. The boy here seems to be somewhat older than Theon here in *P.Oxy.* I 119. The third case is a fourth century BCE lead table found in the Athenian Agora (Agora inv. IL 1702). It is sent by a boy, Lesis, to his mother and a man called Xenocles, asking them to save him from perishing, as he is working presently in a foundry under a wicked master. Also here the boy seems to be somewhat older. See Jordan 2000 for an edition and discussion.
- 37 The word is *arakia*, which literary means chickling beans (*lathyrus sativus*). However, here it would be more up to the point to understand this as denoting more generally 'weed', with a general meaning of 'refuse', or 'rubbish', as Jaakko Frösen pointed to me in a private discussion.
- 38 *P.Oxy.* I 119 (second–third century CE), translation modified after Peter Parsons.
- 39 Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt.
- 40 Naturally, for the age of the writer we have only conjectural evidence: a person not married, living at home, clearly not working or studying outside the household, upsetting his mother, having a person (not a parent) with a power of 'taking him away' from the mother, able to write, but writing bad Greek, using emotional and even conflicting arguments and threats. All would be consistent with a person in his (very) early teens.
- 41 It has to be noted that we do not know if this letter was ever sent. This, naturally, has no bearing on the analysis of Theon's experiences as they are expressed in the text.
- 42 See Clark 1999: 31 on writing history of women in early Christianity: 'we cannot with certainty claim to hear the voices of "real" women in early Christian texts, so appropriated have they been by male authors'.
- 43 See also the plea by Oswell 2013: 280 for scholars of childhood to study these questions.