



Universität
Basel

Research Project

Intl. Conference: "Growing up Motherless in Antiquity"

Third-party funded project

Project title Intl. Conference: "Growing up Motherless in Antiquity"

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Organisation / Research unit

Departement Altertumswissenschaften / Alte Geschichte (Huebner)

Department

Project Website <https://motherlessantiquity.wordpress.com>

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Status Completed

The last forty years have witnessed a vast reclamation project in ancient history, as scholars have worked to recover the voices of historically muted groups, particularly those of women and children. The result is an impressive body of work collecting the traces ancient women and children have left behind, as well as a sophisticated epistemology of the biases, gaps, and silences in the historical record. This research agenda thus tends to grapple with the absence of ancient mothers in the historical record as a methodological challenge, but only rarely with ancient mother absence per se as the object of study. The evidence, however, suggests that mother absence was not merely a secondary artifact of bias or artistic and historiographical conventions; it was also a primary condition of antiquity, one whose root causes, social articulations, and psychological effects require description and exploration, because it had a profound effect on ancient family life and the experience of childhood.

The scholars participating in Growing Up Motherless in Antiquity seek to build on the last four decades of research into the ancient and pre-modern family, as well as recent research into contemporary mother absence, in an attempt to see the phenomenon of ancient mother absence as a continuum, ranging from its obvious manifestation in the total absence of maternal death, to the partial absences of maternal separation brought about by economic necessity, divorce, slavery, social conventions, and perhaps even choice on occasion.

We will also explore the ways in which ancient individuals, families, and communities recognized and responded to maternal absence, from the children who grew up without their mothers to varying degrees, to those who stepped in, were employed, or commanded to mother them, usually a patchwork cast of stepmothers, family members, wet nurses, and domestic slaves.

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