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The commemoration of children in the funerary epigraphy of the Conventus Cluniensis (Hispania Citerior)

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Abstract

This paper examines the funerary inscriptions dedicated to children in the Roman period. The rate of infant mortality was high in this period but only a low percentage of inscriptions were dedicated to children. This underrepresentation of infant mortality has been analyzed from different perspectives, including the emotional attachment of the parents or archaeological funerary remains connected to non-adults. The aim of this paper is to contextualize the epitaphs dedicated to children within the general analysis of the funerary epigraphy, comparing the representation of children with other social groups and the use of Latin epigraphy in the provinces.²

When *Gaemellina* died at the age of five, her parents, *Primulus* and *Lasciua*, dedicated to her an epitaph that marked the place of her tomb.³ In the context of the Roman Empire it could be considered that she was a privileged girl; of course, not because she lived in a historical period of high infant mortality, but because despite her early age at

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² A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the International Conference “Manes adite paterni! Family Spirits in the Greco-Roman World” in Heidelberg in July 2018.

³ *CIRPBurgos* 576.

death and her gender, she had a tombstone to preserve her memory. The exceptionality of this act of commemoration lies in the fact that only a low number of young children received a tombstone during the Roman period despite their high mortality rate.⁴ Although there is no precise information about the life expectancy at birth and the exact demographic curve of the Roman population is unknown, most scholars agree that it would be similar to other modern pre-industrial societies for which there are better data available. Demographic studies indicate that death rates varied considerably by region and period, but the general mortality patterns seem to be constant in all pre-industrial populations. According to this demographic model, mortality levels were high at birth, then declined at the end of childhood-adolescence and progressively increased again during adulthood, giving as a result a V shape mortality curve.⁵

A significant part of the scholarly discussion about children's funerary representation has been focused on explaining the important imbalance between the high level of mortality among children and the number of epitaphs dedicated to them.⁶ Some scholars have proposed that it could be related to a lack of emotional attachment between parents and their children. According to this hypothesis, the frequency of their early death would have led parents to accept it as a natural event -especially when it happened before the first year of life- and to distance themselves emotionally from their children.⁷ This idea finds support in some texts of several classical authors, such as Cicero,⁸ Seneca⁹ or Plutarch,¹⁰ who state, among other issues, that children under the age of three should not be mourned and criticize

⁴ It has been calculated that about 30% of children would likely die before the end of their first year of life and that half of them would never reach adulthood: Hopkins 1966: 252–253, 1983: 125; Saller 1994: 20–25.

⁵ Demographic methods and models as well as the available ancient demographic data can be found in Hopkins 1966, 1983; Parkin 1992 and more recently, in Scheidel 2001a, 2001b, 2007a and 2017.

⁶ The underrepresentation of children in epigraphy is discussed, among others, in Shaw 1991; King 2000; McWilliam 2001; Carroll 2011b; 2011c; Laes 2014 and Carroll 2018. There is no any general agreement about the age at which childhood ended in the Roman period; so different investigations have chosen different age-ranges in this regard: in King 2000 infants between 0-4 and 10-14 years of age; Laes 2014 only infants younger than 3; in Shaw 1991 under 1; McWilliam 2001 until 14; and Laes 2007 until 15. In the present, paediatricians, skeletal biologists or behavioural biologists also classify and designate the lifespan of an individual in different ways: Scheuer and Black 2000: 468-469.

⁷ This perspective had its origin in the Early Modern European family studies presented by Ariès 1960; Shorter 1976 or Stone 1977, and they had an important influence on the analysis of the Roman childhood. For a historiographical review of the study of childhood in Rome, see Laurence, Harlowand and Vuolanto 2007.

⁸ Cic. *Tusc.* 1.93.

⁹ Sen. *Ep.* 99.1-3 and 7-14.

¹⁰ Plut. *Cons. ad ux.* 11.1.

those who express, in their opinion, exaggerated sorrow for the loss of a newborn son or daughter. More recent studies, however, have provided a different perspective that suggests that these ancient testimonies and opinions should not be taken too literally and be accepted as representative of more widespread opinion in Roman society;¹¹ especially since there are other literary sources that reveal sorrow for the death of a child.¹²

Apart from written ancient sources, there is also epigraphic and archaeological evidence that shows the attention that parents and family could pay to children after premature death. For example, the careful disposition of some of their tombs, specific grave goods displayed in burials,¹³ the iconographic representation of young children,¹⁴ or funerary inscriptions that express the pain of their loss.¹⁵ Furthermore, funerary commemoration patterns in epigraphy suggest that emotional attachment would not generally be the main reason for deciding to dedicate an epitaph or not, and consequently, the absence of epitaphs should not be related directly to the absence of sensitivity to the death. It has been largely proved that epigraphy reveals only a very partial picture of the Roman society, not exclusively because only a small portion of the epitaphs has been preserved, but also because members of certain social groups were more likely to receive one than others.¹⁶

The aim of this paper is to address the epigraphic representation of children in relation to general patterns of funerary commemoration of the territory of the *Conventus Cluniensis*, in the province of *Hispania Citerior*.¹⁷ The choice of a limited geographical space, whose epigraphic record is currently under study,¹⁸ permits us to contextualize the presence of dedications to children in a broader social and commemorative perspective.

¹¹ Among others: Golden 1988; King 2000; McWilliam 2001; Rawson 2003 and Carroll 2011a, 2011b, 2011c.

¹² For example, in Plin. *Ep.* 5.16.1-8; Tac. *Ann.* 15.23; Mart. *Epigr.* 7.96; Stat. *Silu.* 5.5; Auson. *Parent.* 10 and Fronto, *Ep.* 1.6.7.

¹³ As indicated in Martin-Kilcher 2000, Vaquerizo Gil 2014 and Newby 2019.

¹⁴ Some examples from Italy in Huskinson 2007, Mander 2013 and Carroll 2014.

¹⁵ Martin-Kilcher 2000 and Carroll 2014.

¹⁶ The clearest example is the fact that men received more epitaphs than women. Some general data of the different representation depending on gender in Shaw 1991.

¹⁷ Other studies in this regard have been mainly focused on Italy: McWilliam 2001; Carroll 2011b; 2011c and the city of Rome: King 2000. Shaw 1991 offered a general study of Western provinces and in Laes 2014 collected inscriptions from several regions and cities but only included infants under 1 year of age.

¹⁸ This paper is part of a larger study about epigraphic commemoration patterns and society of the *Conventus Cluniensis* called “Escritura, conmemoración epigráfica y representatividad social de la epigrafía de época romana del *Conventus Cluniensis*”.

The objective is to look in more detail at patterns of commemoration and compare the representation of children with that of the other social groups attested in the funerary epigraphic record in the Conventus Cluniensis and then with the general situation across Italy and the western provinces of the Roman Empire.

The Conventus Cluniensis is one of the juridical divisions of the province of Hispania Citerior, located in the North-Central part of the Iberian Peninsula (fig. 1). More than 1,500 inscriptions have been found in this area and, of them, almost 1,000 are funerary inscriptions. Their distribution shows major concentrations in the capital of the *conuentus*, the city of Clunia (now Peñalba de Castro) and other cities such as Lara de los Infantes, Palencia or Segovia.

In general terms, the patterns of funerary epigraphy in this region follow the characteristics of the Roman epigraphic culture and funerary commemoration: the use of the common funerary formulae (*hic situs est, sit tibi terra leuis, Dis Manibus...*), stelae as the main support,¹⁹ the predominance of Roman onomastics and the importance of nuclear family relationships between the deceased and the commemorators. An age-at-death of the people commemorated appears in more than half of the epitaphs, i.e., in about 600 of them. Among these inscriptions, there are 54 dedicated to children under 15 years old,²⁰ which corresponds to 9.8% of the inscriptions that include an age-at-death, or 5.75% of all the funerary inscriptions found in the territory.

¹⁹ Although it worth mentioning some local ensembles such as the house-form steles from Poza de la Sal: Abásolo Álvarez, Albertos Firmat and Elorza Guinea 1975 and the river-block inscriptions from the area of the Vadinienses: González Rodríguez 1997 and Belorado: Reyes Hernando 2000.

²⁰ Extending the childhood to the age of 15 might seem excessive; however, I consider it necessary because of the tendency to round the age-at-death in Latin epigraphy. See fig. 3 and note 32.

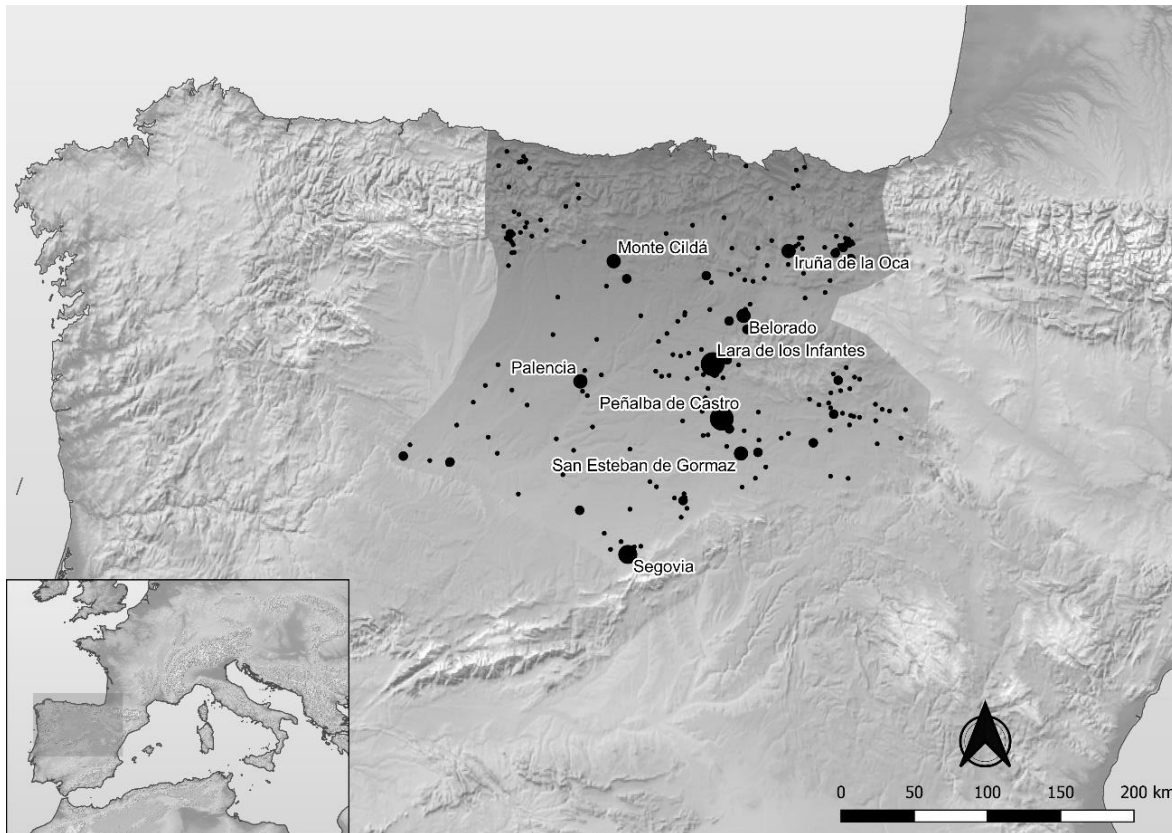


Figure 1. The funerary epigraphy in the Conventus Cluniensis.

A deceased child was the only person commemorated in most of the epitaphs and only six were dedicated to children alongside one or more other members of the family; so, they were predominantly commemorated on their own. Their commemoration did not depend on the setting up of an epitaph for an older person²¹. They were also commemorated using the same type of funerary monuments. For example, the epitaphs of *Nice* and *Gaemellina* -mentioned at the beginning of this paper- were inscribed on the typical house-form stele of Poza de Sal²² and *Superia* was commemorated with an epitaph set up on the common river rock stelae of the area of the Vadinienses and the traditional decorative motives of horses and trees.²³

In most cases, the commemorators of the inscriptions were the parents of the deceased children, as we would expect, acting alone or together. In fact, it is notable that numerous dedications were made by both parents, mother and father, to a much greater

²¹ As seen in modern contexts in King 2000: 138.

²² *CIRPBurgos* 525 and 576.

²³ *HEp* 2, 1990, 25. See note 19.

degree than any other types of commemorations of children initiated by other family members.²⁴ Among those epitaphs not dedicated by parents, there are two dedications between brothers (*AE* 1976, 317 and *CIL* II 2845) and an epitaph dedicated by *L. Fabius Sigerus* to his son aged 19 and his daughter-in-law of 14, which provides evidence of very early marriage.²⁵

Regarding the social status of the deceased, at least three epitaphs were dedicated to very young slaves. *Celadus*, who died at the age of 5, was commemorated together with another slave and a freedwoman, but the dedicator of the epitaph is unknown.²⁶ *Primitivus*, the slave of *Sempronia Paterna*, who died at the age of 12, and *Firmina*, 9 years old, are mentioned in the same epitaph together with their father.²⁷ Finally, there is an epitaph dedicated to an *ancilla Anica*, who died when she was 15 and was then commemorated together with her owner *Annicus Florus*.²⁸ The percentage of Greek names is higher among dedications to children than in other types of inscriptions from the Conventus Cluniensis. As is well known, a Greek name does not provide direct evidence of slave status;²⁹ however, this fact together with the identification of a higher presence of slaves and freedmen among the epitaphs dedicated to children in the city of Rome, could be suggestive of a similar pattern in the Conventus Cluniensis.³⁰

The distribution of the age-at-death of the epitaphs offers a general picture of the most represented age-groups in this territory and allows us to contextualize the epitaphs dedicated to children. The graph (fig. 2) shows a low number of inscriptions dedicated to people younger than 15 years old, but a high number of epitaphs commemorating that group of population aged between 20 and 30 and then a subsequent decrease in the

²⁴ Both parents dedicating in *HEp* 2, 1990, 25; *CIRPBurgos* 525; *CIRPBurgos* 576; *CIL* II 2844; *CIL* II 2839; *HEp* 11, 2001, 501; *HEp* 10, 2000, 590; *ERPSoria* 84; Morales Hernández and Jimeno Martínez 1982; *ERPSoria* 106. In the Conventus Cluniensis parents' dedications are proportionately more frequent in epitaphs dedicated to children than dedications to children by other members of the family, e.g. by a brother or a sister.

²⁵ *ERSegovia* 149. About age at first marriage in the Roman Empire see Scheidel 2007b and the bibliography mentioned there.

²⁶ *AE* 1976, 357.

²⁷ *HEp* 2, 1990, 134.

²⁸ *CIL* II 2955.

²⁹ As pointed out for Hispania by Lozano Velilla 1999.

³⁰ For the city of Rome, see King 2000: 121–122 and Carroll 2018: 24–29.

representation of people from later age-groups, with some peaks in the ages of 50 and 60.³¹ As already demonstrated in a number of earlier studies, the ages given in Roman epitaphs cannot be treated as accurate demographic indicators of actual ages at death because the numbers were frequently rounded or exaggerated by a large part of the population, who might well have been ignorant about their exact age.³²

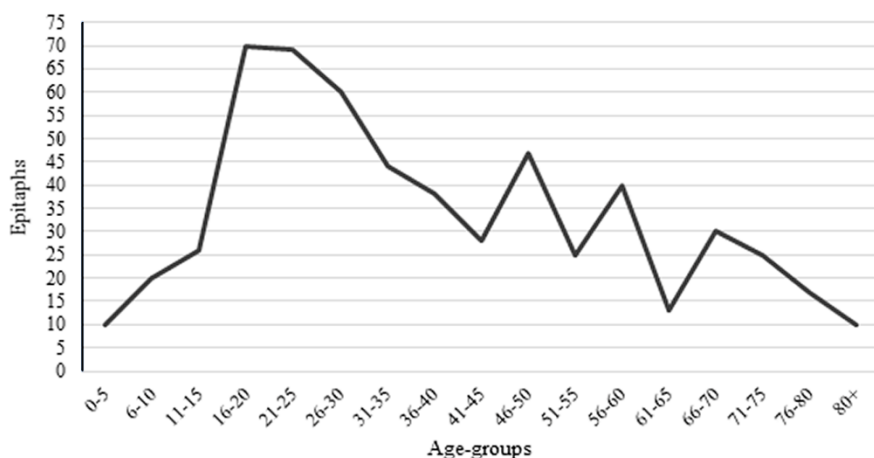


Figure 2. Epitaphs organised by age-groups in the Conventus Cluniensis (N=572).

The epitaphs from the Conventus Cluniensis are also affected by this practice of age-rounding and exaggerating the age at death. The following graph (fig. 3) is a clear demonstration of how much of the evidence for age-at-death clusters at multiples of five and ten years and that the group of people that surpassed the age of 50 is larger than expected considering the life expectancy of the period.³³

³¹ It is interesting to note that the funerary inscriptions with death date from Central Spain analysed by Knapp 1992: 387 have a very similar distribution.

³² See, especially, Scheidel 2001b with previous bibliography and 2017. Ignorance of ages-at-death has been linked with high levels of illiteracy in Duncan-Jones 1990: 79-92 and Laes 2007. In rare cases some epitaphs not only mention the years in designating an age-at-death but also the months and days: see Crespo Ortiz de Zárate and Alonso Ávila 1998.

³³ The life expectancy at birth in pre-industrial population was generally between 20 and 40 years: Scheidel 2017: 138.

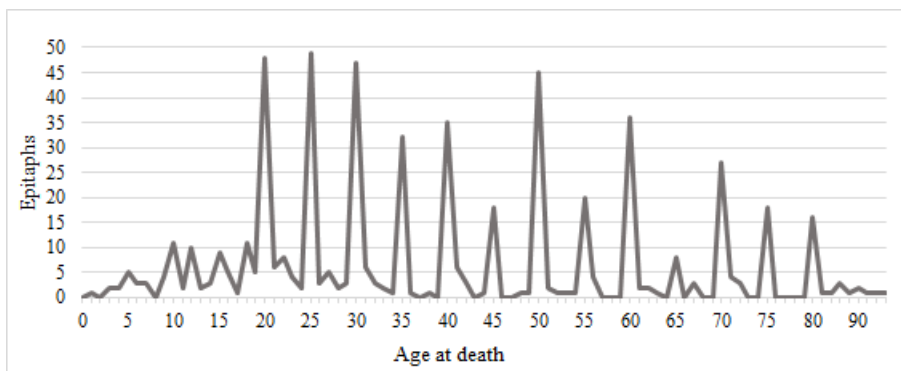


Figure 3. Epitaphs organised by age in the Conventus Cluniensis (N=572).

This graph (fig. 3) does not permit us to draw a curve of the age-groups of the epitaphs or to solve the problem of age-rounding and exaggeration, but it does allow us to nuance how children were represented in the funerary epigraphy of the area. First, it is possible to argue that the underrepresentation of early deaths needs to be extended as far as 19 years of age. The number of epitaphs of people younger than this age is clearly lower than the rest of the age-groups and it immediately precedes the most represented age-at-death range between the ages of 20 and 30.³⁴ Secondly, in the context of this underrepresented age period, it is possible to identify a lower number of epitaphs dedicated to children under 10 years and a general lack of epitaphs dedicated to newborn children.³⁵ This data confirms the underrepresentation of younger children identified in the city of Rome and other Western provinces and extends this to adolescence.³⁶

However, it is also possible to identify some nuances regarding the representation of the youngest ones in funerary epigraphy. The number of inscriptions dedicated to children under 15 is not only low in relation to their high mortality rate, but also regarding the ensemble of epitaphs with age-at-death from this region, since they only represent the 9.8% of them. This contrasts with the city of Rome, where epitaphs dedicated to people under 15 correspond to 34.1% of the inscriptions indicating the age-at-death,³⁷ and Italy, where

³⁴ It is possible that some of the people who died in the late teens had their age rounded to 20 years of age.

³⁵ The youngest infant identified in the epitaphs of the Conventus Cluniensis is *Cantaber*, who died when he was nine months old (*CIL* II 2953).

³⁶ In Italy and, especially, in urban centres such as Rome and Ostia, the representation of children under 10 years of age is quite high compared to other age ranges, but they are still underrepresented if we take into account not only the epitaphs that give an age-at-death but all epitaphs, as indicated by Shaw 1991: 73–80 and Laes 2014.

³⁷ Laes 2007: 28-29.

children under the age of 14 represent the 31% of them in Regiones I, II, VII and VIII³⁸ and 26% in Regio III.³⁹

In terms of gender, the number of epitaphs from the Conventus Cluniensis dedicated to boys and girls under 15 years of age is almost equal: twenty-three commemorations of males as opposed to twenty-two of females⁴⁰. This almost equally balanced gender distribution is constant during childhood, from birth to 15 years, but it changes drastically at older ages, when inscriptions dedicated to men are considerably greater in number than those dedicated to women (fig. 4). This balance between girls and boys epitaphs has also been identified in the province of Lusitania,⁴¹ but it contrasts with the city of Rome and the Western provinces where boys generally received more dedications than girls.⁴²



Figure 4. Gender distribution in epitaphs in the Conventus Cluniensis organised by age-groups (N=572).

The balance between epitaphs dedicated to girls and boys has been examined for the province of Lusitania in the context of the larger presence of women in the epigraphy and

³⁸ McWilliams 2001:80.

³⁹ Laes 2012: 102. The percentage of the Conventus Cluniensis is closer to the average of the Latin West, 16%, calculated by Laurence and Trifilò 2012:36 considering epitaphs with indication of age from Africa Pronconsularis, the Mauretaniae, Hispania Tarraconensis, Gallia Narbonensis, Lusitania, Aquitania, Dacia, Moesia and all of Italia with the exception of Rome. However, it is not possible to compare the results by province because data was not offered individually. According to Shaw 1991: 74-76 children were commemorated more often in places with higher degree of urbanization than in rural areas.

⁴⁰ The remaining inscriptions with ages under 15 are too damaged to know if the deceased was a girl or a boy.

⁴¹ In a paper that studied the family relations in the epigraphy from the province of Lusitania: Edmondson 2005: 208-209.

⁴² As the following studies show for the city of Rome: Hopkins 1983: 225; King 2000: 126-128; Carroll 2011c: 48; Laes 2007: 32-33 and 2014: 137. For Italy, see McWilliam 2001: 79; for Gaul, Baills 2003: 99; for other Western provinces, Shaw 1991: 68-71

their higher cultural valuation in Hispania compared to the situation in other Western provinces.⁴³ It is difficult, however, to extend these commemoration patterns to the Conventus Cluniensis since the representation of women and men in all the epitaphs of the region show a clear predominance of males; a ratio of 176 men for each 100 women and 166:100 if we only consider those epitaphs that include an age-at-death.⁴⁴

The examination of the epitaphs dedicated to children and their contextualization in the funerary commemoration patterns of the Conventus Cluniensis as a whole leads to several conclusions. The distribution of ages-at-death in this region confirms that the information given in the epitaphs does not represent the demographic reality of the period and that it cannot be understood as a real mortality curve but as simply an epigraphic representation curve. Not only are the children underrepresented, regardless their gender, but also the number of adult women is unrealistic and the death of men between 20 and 30 seems to be overrepresented. The age distribution graph (fig. 2) represents when people were more likely to receive an epitaph, but it was not related to personal and private emotional attachment. Instead, adult men were more visible in epigraphy because they had a higher social valuation and, generally, a predominant role compared to women and children in most aspects of public life. The prominence of adult men in public affairs has been repeatedly mentioned as the cause of their importance in epigraphy; and the motivation for public display, self-representation or public prestige, has been one of the main reasons put forward to explain the spread and success of epigraphic culture.⁴⁵ The motivation for setting up an epitaph for a child would probably not have been as important as it would have been for commemorating other social groups with greater social prestige or a special interest in using epigraphy such as freedmen, for example. Because of their age, children were generally not an active sector of society and, therefore, the social motivation

⁴³ The larger presence of women in the Iberian Peninsula, especially acting as dedicators, was already noted by Saller and Shaw 1984.

⁴⁴ However, preliminary analysis indicates that this ratio is not constant across all the territory, with some cities such as Lara de los Infantes, Belorado and Palencia revealing a more balanced representation of men and women than others. These geographical variations indicate that regional and local studies are needed - especially in Hispania, where the presence of women in epigraphy seems to differ from what is found in other Western provinces- to understand better the role of gender and age in the patterns of funerary commemoration. For some general data about gender representation in the Roman Empire, see Shaw 1991; in Hispania: Gonzalbes Cravioto 2001, 2003.

⁴⁵ Among others: Beltrán Lloris 1995, Alföldy 1998 and Abascal Palazón 2016.

to invest in an epitaph for them after their premature deaths would probably have been lower and could have persuaded parents not to invest money in an epitaph.⁴⁶

There is one more aspect that should be taken into consideration when analyzing the funerary commemoration of children: they did not always receive the same funerary treatment as adults. Based on archaeological evidence, there was a complex panorama in the funerary rituals, especially, among younger infants. Archaeological records suggest that they could be the recipients of several types of burials: they could be cremated or inhumated; they could be buried in the same cemeteries as adults (among them or in a special space reserved for them), in a separate cemetery or even outside the main burial areas, most of all, in domestic contexts.⁴⁷ However, it is sometimes difficult to evaluate all these different rituals because children are also generally underrepresented in Roman cemeteries,⁴⁸ probably to a large extent due to serious methodological problems and limitations related to the preservation of non-adult remains.⁴⁹

The connection between funerary beliefs and funerary epigraphy is complex. The entire population, at different levels and in different ways, held beliefs connected to death. However, funerary epigraphy was used by only one part of society. Practices of epigraphic commemoration were varied and based not only on the wealth of the family, which affected whether they could afford to pay for it, but also on the age and gender of the deceased, among other decisive factors. Children were probably not in the group of the most epigraphically commemorated because, regardless of their mortality rate, they were usually not in a publicly important social position, which seems to have been one of the main motivations for receiving an epitaph in the Roman period.⁵⁰ This does not mean that parents

⁴⁶ There could also have been other kinds of epitaphs set up using cheaper and perishable materials such as wood or stucco: King 2000: 126.

⁴⁷ About the different contexts in which children could be buried, see Blaizot, Alixand and Ferber 2003. The tradition of burying newborn children in domestic spaces was a pre-Roman tradition that had a long continuity after the Roman Empire. Some examples of this type of domestic burial in Hispania in Sevilla Conde 2010-2011: 202–203 and Fernández Crespo 2008. About this practice in Italy: Carroll 2011c: 45 and in Gaul: Baills 2013a and 2013b.

⁴⁸ Percentages of some Roman necropolis from Britain in Pearce 2001; Italy, Roman Gaul and Germany in Carroll 2011b and Roman Spain in Sevilla Conde 2014.

⁴⁹ On these methodological problems, see Pearce 2001: 129–132.

⁵⁰ Sigismund Nielsen 2019 suggests that the importance of interpersonal *pietas* in family context and the incapacity of children of expressing it because of their young age could be one of the reasons of their underrepresentation. According to this idea, dedications to children were more abundant in Christian context

did not have an emotional attachment to their younger children, but that usually, the way of expressing it was not generally via funerary epigraphy.

In the case of the Conventus Cluniensis it can be concluded that the epigraphic habit privileged the representation of adult men, at the expense of younger and female members of the society. However, once parents decided to set up an epitaph, the commemorative patterns were the same as those observed in other types of epitaphs. The inscriptions dedicated to children share the same external and internal characteristics as those dedicated to adults: for instance, the same funerary formulae, the same decorative schemes.⁵¹ They were given the same type of epithets as adults (*pietissimus*, *carissimus*, etc.)⁵² and they were commemorated most of all by members of the nuclear family, most of the time by their own parents.

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because of a change from horizontal *pietas* among the members of the family to vertical *pietas* toward God and individual salvation.

⁵¹ Also pointed out by Laes 2014.

⁵² In the Conventus Cluniensis there are five attestations of *pietissimus-pietissima* and four of *carissimus-carissima* among the inscriptions dedicated to children under 15 years. See Curchin 1982; King 2000; Sigismund Nielsen 1997.

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