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Childhood in the Past
An International Journal

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ycip20

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To cite this article: April Pudsey & Ville Vuolanto (2021) Children's Urban Environments in an Ancient City: Social and Physical Realities, Childhood in the Past, 14:2, 161-176, DOI: 10.1080/17585716.2021.1956050

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17585716.2021.1956050

Published online: 07 Sep 2021.

CHILDHOOD IN THE PAST
2021, VOL. 14, NO. 2, 161–176
https://doi.org/10.1080/17585716.2021.1956050

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Children's Urban Environments in an Ancient City: Social and Physical Realities

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ABSTRACT

The crucial roles played by young people in the lives of ancient urban and civic spaces has been underestimated in discussions of urban life. Through our case study in Roman Egypt, we scrutinize expectations placed on young people, the specific roles they would have taken in these environments, and their agency in shaping, and responding to, the expectations and demands placed on them by their physical and social environments. The discussion addresses three major themes: young people's visibility and accessibility within the city scape; expectations placed on young people and their agency in responding to them; and the geographical and practical limits of movement for young people. The research is based on papyri from the Roman Egyptian metropolis of Oxyrhynchos and its administrative area, from late first century BCE to sixth century CE, and a resulting database of over 700 cases mentioning children and young people.

KEYWORDS

Agency; Roman Empire; pre-modern children; history of every-day life; Roman Egypt; Oxyrhynchos

Introduction

Research which has aimed to historically reconstruct elements of daily life of young people in ancient cities, has necessarily incorporated textual, inscribed and material evidence from the perspective of specific and formal civic buildings, quarters, structures and activities. Much of this research has focused on a sense of locality and regional difference, and on notions of civic identity, in large part because surviving material is bound up with the formal and very rigid structures of civic life, such as entrance into an *ephebate* or gymnasial group, or some form of socio-political business, education or work. Quite naturally, the majority of research has been concentrated on classical Athens (Garland 1990; Golden 1990; Patterson 1998), and on cities in the Roman world (Bradley 1991; Harlow and Laurence 2002; Dixon 1988; Laes 2011; Rawson 2011. See also Lippert and Schentuleit 2008 for urban civic contexts in large towns). It is, therefore, understandable how one might very easily be led into viewing the ancient city as mere, yet sturdy, scenery through which actors moved. However, recently research has begun to move beyond a picture of the urban space as static and constraining, towards one which understands its space as

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changing, responsive to the behaviours of its inhabitants and visitors, and less rigidly defined, depending on the groups and individuals using those spaces (See e.g. Aasgaard 2015; Laurence 2017 with various examples across the ancient Mediterranean in Baird and Pudsey in press). See also Baird 2014; Boozer 2015; Pudsey in press; Boozer forthcoming).

In this paper we ask whether particular relationships exist between the changing space of the city, and the behaviours and needs of its young people. Who we, as historians, are representing when we attach the label of youth to an individual can potentially vary quite widely. In part this is due to the unspecific nature of our source material, and in part due to our modern, and often relative, conceptions of who we consider to be young. We take a rather pragmatic approach in this paper: within the context of ancient classical societies, all those under the age of fourteen years were legally minors, and subject to particular legal freedoms, limitations and obligations, and as such we include them as representing children's lives. Further, we allow ourselves to be led by what we know of the classical understanding of youth in political, social and legal terms, a rather complex issue. In classical Athens (on which cities in Roman Egypt were modelled) individuals were enfranchised but not considered fully adult until into their twenties, and in Rome, young adults remained under the literal legal and social power of their father, or next adult male relative. Moreover, in both contexts, full adulthood was considered to follow only at the end of the process of puberty, around the age of twenty, and the great majority of the young women had married (Golden 1990; Beaumont 2012, Saller 1994, Jewell (forthcoming)). Ultimately, the age of twenty-five years appears to mark a demographic, social and a final juridical cut-off point, at which a significant proportion of young people had likely out-survived their fathers and potentially their uncles, and were therefore likely to have begun enjoying more adult freedoms and obligations (Saller 1994. See also Akrigg 2011, Pudsey 2013). We therefore consider those individuals mentioned in the sources to be under twenty-five, as young people. In practice, the majority of our cases deal with minors, and those who have recently reached an age of majority, but in a number of cases where specific ages are not specified, we have inferred an age group category from context: even in documents detailing very formal age-based activities (such as entrance to the gymnasial groups) the ages given can often be rounded, approximated or considered of less importance than we would tend to assume. In all, age specificity was of little importance in the Roman Egypt, and social, or performed, age was more relevant than the biological age.

In the present study we adopt sociological approaches to understanding perspectives on young people's use of space. Modern sociological studies highlight the importance of locality, environment and movement in children's lives – these factors constitute prominent features in neighbourhood provision and access in policy-making (McKendrick 2009; Holloway and Valentine 2000). The impact of environment has also had the effect of creating a dramatic shift in the ways in which sociologists think about children and young people, moving beyond theories of children as mostly passive agents in their socialization, towards seeing children as cultural and social agents in the transmission of culture. Children ' … inhabit a world of meaning created by themselves and through their interaction with adults' (see James, Jenks, and Prout 1998 on the 'socially constructed child', with the quote on p. 28, and discussion in Pudsey 2017 and Katajala-Peltomaa and Vuolanto 2011). The expanding of horizons from local perspectives during one's formative years would shape cultural awareness, the development of independence and cultural identity, and

adaptability to new circumstances. In assessing the influences of space, that is, of neighbourhood, locality and environment on young people's lives in the past, the extent of movement is a crucial factor: the lived experience of young people on the move would have differed markedly from that of their peers who were more rooted in their particular locale. We must, therefore, ask for what purposes, for how long, and how far, did young people, either through choice, necessity or by force, stretch the extent of their boundaries in relation to their households, neighbourhoods, and cities.

In order to understand the role of the city in young people's lives, and the role of young people in the city's life, we must look beyond a simple overview of the spaces in which young people lived out their lives, and instead look for evidence of ways in which they understood, interpreted and performed within these spaces. More specifically, we need to reconstruct important elements of the everyday lives of young people in order to paint a picture of their growing-up processes. Such a reconstruction will enable insight into young people's lives and concerns, and into the overall operation of the city for a great proportion of its inhabitants. Our case for studying this is offered by Roman city of Oxyrhynchos: a crucial city of its province, a metropolis, with a population at its height in early second century CE some 15,000 (Alston 2002, 331–34) to 30,000 (Bowman 2000, 173–87) people, at least almost half were under fifteen years of age. A discussion of the ways in which premodern populations are determined as having been 'young' is beyond the scope of this article, though the order of magnitude here is not in doubt (see Saller 1994 with Holleran and Pudsey 2011).

We scrutinize children and young people's likely agency in shaping and responding to their physical and social environments, and the specific roles the children would have expected to take in these environments. How visible was presence of the young people in the city space, and in limits they moved in everyday situations: which were the areas of the city in which they spent time, and in what contexts? How would civic space have worked for young people? What roles did specific physical environments play in shaping their experiences – in what ways, for example, were they able to shape their experience of different areas of the city through transgression of expected behaviours? Through these questions it may be possible to arrive at an assessment of the ways in which young people were in fact crucial to the design and the lives of ancient urban and civic spaces.

In what follows, we consider these questions in three parts. First, how visible, accessible and permissible, was the city from the perspective of young people? Second, what kind of different behaviours were expected, and acted out, in different areas, and what degree of agency might young people have had in shaping their use of the city-space, whether according to these values or in transgression of them? What was the nature of young people's attachment to a particular civic identity tied to their locale? And third, what were the limits of the movement for young people of Oxyrhynchos: did they typically see world beyond their own city, and in what contexts?

For this case study, we use as source material our database of over 700 documents relating directly to young people and their everyday lives in family, work, learning, social and travelling contexts in Roman period sources from the city of Oxyrhynchos and its administrative area.[1] The number of sources as such is not negligible, but it spans six centuries, dealing with a number of different source genres, and *a priori* giving to us an adult view of childhood and children, making it difficult to reach children's

agency and their own culture. We know only one letter clearly written by an underage person himself (*P. Oxy*. I 119, 101–300 CE), and some others which appear to have been written by young people (e.g. *P. Oxy*. IX1216, 101–300 CE; SB XXII 15708, 100 CE; *P. Oxy*. VIII 1160, 201–400 CE; *P. Oxy*. LV 3809, 101–300 CE; *P. Oxy*. LVI 3862, 301–500 CE; *P. Oxy*. XX2273, 276–300 CE). Still, all who wrote these documents and dictated them, had once been children themselves, and at least some sideways reading of the documents would afford an opportunity to observe the expectations placed on young people, and the aftermath of, or precursor to, their behaviours. In this sense our results may be seen as glimpses of young people's realities in Roman Oxyrhynchos, as frameworks of their experiences more than the experiences themselves (see further Vuolanto 2017, esp. 21–2 on the limitations and possibilities of doing research on premodern children's experiences and agency).

The world we deal with was fluid: both the cityscape with its structure and the perspectives of young people were in a constant state of flux, in dialogue with the actions and expectations of peers and adults. Moreover, young people across a range of social groups, from those enslaved to working children and to elite gymnasial groups, would view, use and move through civic space in different ways.

The city in young people's eyes

In tracking young people's movement around the ancient city, and even beyond its limits, we follow the path marked out by our sources, even if they leave us few clues to the full extent and impact of the everyday movements of young people. Primarily these children, or adolescents, were mobile within their own neighbourhoods, though some did travel independently to nearby regions. In our database, no specific group of sources focuses on mobile children and young people and their visibility in the cityscape. Documents which refer directly to their local space and movement provide information on thirty-five cases; of these, most concern young people in their teenage years, almost all of them male, a result perhaps of our documentation concentrating on issues of administration, work, and education (gymnasium), all spheres of life dominated by male agency and the male gaze.

Oxyrhynchos was one of the major cities in Egypt under Roman rule, with a central administrative status, and was visited by Roman emperors. Only the rudiments of the actual topography of the city are fully understood (Coles 2007, 10–14 and Turner 2007, 143–144), and only some of the main buildings, the theatre, extensive stoas, and some of the gates, can be securely identified; most other remains cannot be connected to the textual evidence mentioning places and spaces in Oxyrhynchos and nearby. The documents mention many other features of the city, with a marketplace, a Capitolium and many temples (both 'native' and 'Roman'), record office and a bath, schools, a gymnasium, and an imperial palace; in Late Antiquity there were also at least two churches, a council hall and a circus. Without doubt Oxyrhynchos was both in appearance and in action a Hellenised *polis*, with a local elite constructing its civic identity and from the Severan period onwards, its own city council, games and, for example, a public *grammaticus* (See Bowman 2007, 172–175).

As a consequence of relatively scant archaeological evidence, any discussion of the cityscape and relationships between the city's people and their environment in

Oxyrhynchos must necessarily concentrate on the issues of visibility and use of space as indicated in written sources.[2] As for children, first of all, it seems that there were very few parts of the city in which they were not visible at least occasionally. In a young population, every living quarter in the city must have been inhabited with, or at least frequented by, children and young people. In this, Oxyrhynchos differed little from other urban communities in the Roman empire. In rich houses and palaces in the city and in the estates on its fringe, children were part of the owner's household as family members, as workers at their own right (both as slaves and free), and as family members of slaves and servants. Those children not yet of age to work, or to help in household businesses, but old enough to be free of the constant care of their elders, were everywhere in the courtyards and streets of the neighbourhoods running, loitering and playing. If the younger ones were playing in the midst of the official buildings and workshops, the older ones were themselves taking part in to the activities in gymnasium (boys older than thirteen or fourteen), in the shrines and temples (younger boys and girls together with their families, later more on their own, and some with religious roles themselves), and in the workshops, often as apprentices (Pudsey 2017 on gymnasium; Vuolanto 2015 on apprentices; Vuolanto 2010 on religion; Huntley 2017; Toner 2017; Dolansky 2017 and Caseau 2017 on leisure, play and presence).

Apprentices, little over ten years old and very much present in the sources, would also be visible in other ways in the city scape, as they would regularly live with their families or masters, and daily go from their homes to work 'from sunrise to sunset' (there were free boys staying with their masters, but living at home, such asin *SB* X 10236, 36 CE; *P. Fouad* 37, 48 CE; *P. Oxy*. XXXI 2586, 253 CE; *P. Oxy*. *Hels*. 29, 54 CE; *SB* XXIV 16253, 97–103 CE; for enslaved boys, see *BGU* IV 1021, 201–300 CE, and *P. Oxy*. XLI, 2977, 239 CE). In some cases the underage apprentice and the master would live in the same 'quarter' of the city typically comprising fewer than around ten residential streets (*PSI* VIII 871, 66 CE; *P. Mich*. III 170, 49 CE), but there are also cases in which the master lived in the other part of the city (*P. Mich*. III 171, 58 CE; *P. Mich*. III 172, 62 CE; *SB* XXIV 16186, 70 CE). In one case, a boy is given a choice of whether he wants to continue living with his mother, or move to his master's place of residence (*P. Oxy*. XLI 2971 66 CE). Some children needed to move away from their households, for instance Aurelia Aphrodite, an underage girl, was given to learn and to perform weaving for four years, staying with her master during this period as a pledge, in order that her father would have a loan of 400 silver drachmae (*P.Oxy* LXVII 4596, 264 CE). Also Senerceus, another underage girl, had worked for a certain Arsinoe for two years to pay the interest of a loan. She could not have been more than ten years of age when she started her term (*P. Oxy*. LXXVIII 5169, 18 BCE). Likewise Dioskos, when he started his apprentice term of one year, was to move to his master's home (*P.Wisc*. I 4, 53 CE; for similar arrangements, see also *P. Oxy*. IV 724, 155 CE and *P. Oxy*. XXXVIII 2875, 201–255 CE). It is a common feature of these documents that young people apprenticed were rarely apprenticed alone, but with a number of their peers. From the sample of extant documents it is not possible to firmly ascertain trends in the distances young people travelled to these workshops, but it was certainly inevitable that young people would have been apprenticed alongside others from different quarters of the city, if not further away.

Whereas apprentices would have been a group of young people in a fairly stable socio-economic position and even protected by detailed contracts, there would have been a much more numerous group of children working away from their households who

have left no such documentation of their working conditions and environments. Scattered references to these young workers can be, however, found. A case of an adolescent working away from home is hinted at in a letter, in which a woman away from home sends instructions on what to send to her, and to take good care of her clothes back home while herself sending money to her mother and brother. Thus, it seems we have here a young, unmarried woman working temporarily outside her home (*P. Oxy*. XX 2273, 276–300 CE).

In the fields surrounding the city, and in gardens inside the city, there were children working, and helping their families in different tasks. Caring for animals seems to have been a task especially suitable for smaller children (*P. Oxy*. XLII 3033, 45–47 CE; see also *P. Oxy*. XLII 3048, 246 CE for little children working in the estates of Calpurnia Heraclia aka Eudamia). In a series of documents from the Apion estates we find (enslaved) family groups as seasonal workers, among which children working with their brothers, fathers and uncles (*P. Princ*. II 96, r. col I, 551–557 CE, with Vuolanto 2015, 102). These families most probably were not far away from their home estates, and thus the children were not far away from their familiar neighbourhoods.

Another group of children and young people visible in the cityscape were the offspring of the local upper echelons of the civic social status groups, who mostly lived on their family estates outside the city but were registered in the city gymnasium. It must be expected that for these teenagers this would imply either frequent trips between home and city, or, more probably, a need to stay with a relative or a trusted friend of the family in the city to attend the activities of the gymnasium, and for studying in the city (*P. Oxy*. XXXVIII 2855, 291 CE; *P. Oxy. III* 531, 101–200 CE; *P. Oxy*. III 495, 181–9 CE). This would considerably widen the living sphere for some children rather early on life. These young people registered in the gymnasium would also be visible in the cityscape through the displays during the local festivals (*P. Oxy*. I 42, 323 CE). And, naturally, children of different status would have moved inside the city, or from one village to another, establishing connections with new physical and social environments whenever their family or household moved to a new address, or when their own parents had died and they needed to seek refuge with relatives living elsewhere, or potentially even in cases when their families had needed to flee (*P. Pintaudi* 19, 501–700 CE; *P. Oxy*. XXVII 2479, 501–600 CE; *P. Mich inv*. 87, 74 CE; *P. Mert*. I 26, 274 CE; *P. Oslo* III 105, 139 CE. Cf. also results of child adoption, as in *P. Oxy*. IX 1206, 335 CE).

There certainly were examples, striking to the modern eye, of unusual and unpleasant situations in which children would be visible in Roman cities and street life. Infants, for example, might start their new lives from well-known and frequently visited spots like dung heaps, if abandoned there and found by a passer-by or sought out by a slave trader, and in turn being handed over to a wet nurse be nursed (sometimes outside of the city) for a period of up to two years, before returning to the city. The most likely cost of surviving abandonment was enslavement (See *P. Oxy*. I 37, 49 CE; *P. Rein*. II 103 and *P. Rein*. II 104, both 26 CE; *SB* XVI 12952, 68 CE; *PSI* IX 1065, 157 CE; *PSI* XII 1230, 203 CE; *P. Oxy*. LXXVIII 5168, 18 BCE, with Pudsey 2013 and Pudsey and Vuolanto in press). The realities of child slavery could also become visible in other ways, for instance when Techosis and Chairas, a one-year-old boy and his presumably older sister, had experienced the fate of being sold 'in the street' together with their mother (*P. Oxy*. II 375, ca 79 CE).

Overall, the evidence indicates a natural extension over time in young people's horizons, from household to neighbourhoods and, in their early teens, to the public sphere of the city, as young people were either living in enslavement, or started to work, become apprentices, or, for those in the upper social echelons, becoming educated and starting to visit the gymnasium located in the 'gymnasium quarter' of the city. For young people, studying and working at least signified a means of broadening viewpoints, becoming more and more visible in the cityscape, and exposure to a world beyond their immediate family's concerns.

Behaviour and shaping the city: expectations and reality

In a third century CE literary fragment, found in Oxyrhynchos, we have a simile referring to a boy disturbing a wasps' nest with smoke (*P.Oxy*. LXIV 4428, *Alexandra*, a Hellenistic poem originally written by Lycophron (3rd c. BCE)). This serves to remind us that children do dangerous or adventurous things of their own accord, enlivening their surroundings sometimes with unexpected consequences, and there are often incongruities between expectations and actual behaviours. Children, in general, were certainly not restricted to their homes.

Young people's activities, behaviours, and viewpoints were pivotal to life in the city; the day to day economics of Oxyrhynchos depended heavily on the trades in which children took part. Manual (and skilled) labour of young apprentices (both free and slave) in the weaving industry was central to the running of the city (see Bagnall 1993, 82–3; Menten-Plesters 2017, 123–4). In the city streets one could also encounter young shepherds with their flocks (*P. Oxy*. XLII 3033, 45–7 CE; *P. Oxy*. XXXVIII 2850, 29 CE; *SB* XVI 12761, 27 CE), or a small enslaved girl, with an escort on her way to her singing lessons (*P. Oxy*. L 3555, 1–200 CE). What we do not see in the sources would be references to children carrying fuel, food from the marketplaces, or water – however, taken the frequency of enslaved children these scenes cannot have been rare in the city scape. The case of this singing girl shows also some of the risks of city life for children, as she was knocked down by a donkey driver while 'crossing the city'.

There is also a report documenting the perilous condition of a school belonging to 'the schoolmaster', which had become unsafe for its pupils – and indeed even a Physician's report on a girl's injuries caused by a house falling down (*P. Oxy*. LXIV 4441, 315–6 CE; *P. Oxy*. I 52, 325 CE). In this type of document adults attempt to claim redress for damages as a result of dangerous situations or behaviours of other adults and, as such, are to be treated as potentially hyperbolic descriptions; but the rhetorical use of children in this way points toward a shared moral and personal concern for children's safety that is expected of those being petitioned, by those petitioning and the potential audience of these texts. In the speculative cases, like the one concerning the school building, they point towards the acceptance of the high probability that, no matter what or where the situation, there would have been young people in the vicinity. Any study of the ancient city must so take into account the huge contribution made by children and young people's activities and concerns within it.

Being part of the local elites meant taking on responsibility from an early age. There is a document recording that boys, who were about to come of age (*mallokouretas*), should take part in the public meetings and perform liturgies for the city – following their

fathers (*P. Oxy.* XXIV 2407; 276–300 CE with Montserrat 1996, 39–41). Thus, in late third century, already by the age of thirteen, sons of the local elites could have taken part in the public life of the city, and had a voice there, at least in principle.

A most significant issue of space in terms of expectation comes with the gymnasial groups. Families registered their sons in the gymnasium near their living place (city quarter) when they were thirteen, and if the father or both parents had died, the registering of children seems to have been an important task for the guardians or more temporary supervisors, often relatives (e.g. *PSI* VII 731, 88–9 CE; *P. Corn.* 18, 50–51 CE; *P. Oxy.* XXXVIII 2855, 291 CE), with Pudsey and Vuolanto 2017, 81, 84–6 (on uncles and aunts). It was important that children would carry on the family name, reputation, and status into subsequent generations. On a local level, the gymnasium was both an important symbol and an actual place for this purpose, signifying an attachment to what was commonly understood in their social circles as a sophisticated and powerful Hellenistic culture, and acting as a place for the youth of local elites to get together, train, learn and network. On the other hand, to be registered as a member of a gymnasial group would have meant lower taxation.

To attend the gymnasium meant, therefore, a certain position within the city and its socio-political structures, and with the possible victories, a certain renown. There were different activities one could attend, both in the city and elsewhere; in one document we encounter a fifteen-year-old boy serving as a herald in the games, and a nineteen-year-old boy appearing (competing?) as a poet (*P. Oxy*. XXII 2338, 289 CE). There were highly prestigious games open for *epheboi* of the gymnasiums both in Oxyrhynchos and in neighbouring cities (*P. Oxy*. LXXIX 5209, 267 CE; *PSI* III 199, 203 CE; *P. Oxy*. LXXIX 5206, 233–4 CE with Remijssen 2015, 111–28). To be a winner in these games was an honour to be referred to continuously in later life (e.g. *BGU* IV 1093, 265 CE; *CPL* 216, 249 CE; *SB* IV 7442, 269–272 CE).

The symbolic nature of childhood and youth was at play to a very high degree through this process, and visibility meant visibility for generations to come, as the family name and presence was recorded and re-recorded in each generation of the *epikrisis*, for example. The importance of the gymnasial and metropolitan groups for Hellenised cities was central in perpetuating the social and political order and activity of the local ruling elite. The activities related to this status placed boys at the centre of one of the city's most important socio-political institutions. Educational, agricultural and social and sporting life in Oxyrhynchos were all the heart of civic life, and children and adolescents were key to their own success in shaping the city and its surrounding regions. What children and youth did, was of paramount importance for civic identity and the sense of continuity of the community.

Children naturally took part in the family celebrations. These frequently took place not only in family homes and courtyards (*P. Oxy.* XLIX 3501, 201–300 CE; *P. Oxy.* VI 926, 201–300 CE; *P. Oxy*. LXVI 4542, 201–300 CE and 4543, 276–300 CE; *P. Oxy*. IX1214, 401–500 CE; *P. Oxy*. I 111, 201–300 CE), but often also in public venues; there was a wedding invitation to the temple of Sabazius (*P. Oxy*. XXXIII 2678, 201–300 CE), and an invitation to dine on the occasion of a boy's *epikrisis* in the Capitolium, Eastern Stoa of Oxyrhynchos city centre (*P. Oxy*. LXVI 4541, 201–300 CE). A singular case of children appearing with their families at the very heart of the public life of the city occurred, when during the Decian persecutions, family members were required to sacrifice and taste the sacrifices publicly (*Oxy*. IV 658, 250 CE and *P. Oxy*. XII 1464, 250 CE). The family home – and indeed the composition of

the family – is again not a straightforwardly discernible quantity, in part because of the sparsity of archaeological evidence of housing in Oxyrhynchos. But we know from housing in large towns (and in rural contexts) that houses were an active player in the shaping of family and community relations (See Pudsey in press; Boozer forthcoming. One feature of housing in Egypt was the accessibility of courtyard spaces, in which families cooked, played, ate, and engaged in a range of religious activities, often within the context of a courtyard shared with another house and/or open to the streets and accessible to individuals beyond the inhabitants of the house. Young people were the focal points of cultic activities that served to bring together members of the same household, and those of others (Swift, Stoner and Pudsey 2021, with Nifosi 2019).

Certainly, children of the priestly families were expected to follow their parents into priestly offices, and this meant an early initiation to the temple and its life. Higher initiations required circumcision and an *epikrisis* registration for the boys (*PSI* IX1039, 216–7 CE; *P. Oxy*. L 3567, 252 CE; *SB* XVI 12987, 134–5 CE), but the lower office of the 'bearer of the gods' (*theagos*) was possible both children younger than thirteen and after this age and the registration (*SB* V 7634, 249 CE*; P. Hamb*. IV 245, 166 CE; *P. Oxy*. LIX3974, 165–6 CE). There were also temples outside the city, recruiting future priests from among the notables of the local villages. We have, for example, a petition of a father on behalf of two half-brothers, Longinus and Pekysis, already registered as priests. As they are now twelve the family member responsible for their religious life requires permission for them to undergo circumcision when they become of age. The family comes from the Seryphis, and the father is a priest of 'Ammon, Horus, Isis and *sunnaoi theoi*' (*SB* XVIII 13129, 207–8 CE and 13130, 207–8 CE. See also *P. Oxy*. XLIX 3470 and 3471, both 131 CE). While the requirement (and documentation) of the circumcision makes the young men's participation in religious life more visible, also young women appear in our sources in religious sphere. There is, for example, a reference to a mother and a daughter, both having served as sacred virgins of an unknown deity in their youth. Here, too, the next generation would continue the family tradition (*P. Oxy*. XLIV 3177, 247 CE).

Family continuity, whether through religious and cultic activity, or socio-political civic values, was vital for small communities in cities such as Oxyrhynchos; the family was the means through which intensely important social and cultural identity was forged, lived out, and understood, and it was through children and young people that this was expected to continue. We might ask with whom, or whose values and expectations, might these have been at odds? The Roman state encouraged the development of hereditary municipal elite groups in the Hellenised cities of its eastern provinces, largely as a means of permitting those provinces to govern and tax their own people on Rome's behalf. In provinces such as Egypt, where structures and processes already aligned with this system, it was convenient to encourage the continued practices of *epikrisis* and gymnasial groups with various tax and other benefits. In terms of young people's social and political development in these elite Hellenised groups, the expectations were often the same as those of the Roman state; whether those young people's expectations were met is another thing. The symbolic nature of childhood and adolescence is in many ways a 'top down' set of expectations, rather than those of young people themselves, though, of course, this is not necessarily a binary.

Beyond the city limits

Oxyrhynchos was a city of many areas, quarters, streets and buildings, but it was not cut off from its environs; much of its population, including children, would have had access to the local countryside, and have had necessity to travel through it in and out of the city. It would be rather artificial to reconstruct behaviours and activities merely on the basis of geographic perimeters, where those perimeters were in fact often elastic: movement in and out of the city proper was not out of the ordinary.

It is within the context of slavery that we see children and young people moving around the city and beyond its limits in regular basis, even across huge distances. There appears to have been little stability in home environment for these children: from a very young ages they were vulnerable to enforced movement as a consequence of trade between countries as well as between the cities and villages inside Egypt. We encounter enslaved children and young people in Oxyrhynchos, who had experienced enforced movement in their childhood away from their homes, for example, in Mauretania, Macedonia and Mesopotamia (also for cases below, see Pudsey and Vuolanto in press).

For most enslaved children the distance was within Egypt and its boundaries. At this end of the spectrum we meet a boy, Totoes, still a minor and officially designated with the label of 'home-born slave' (that is, he was born into a position of slavery), who was hired to work for another household – thus he would have been able to return to his home of origin after the contract time was over (*PSI* VI 710, 101–200 CE). However, because of the nature of the trade in people, enslaved children regularly moved from house to house, and even local sales were enough to separate them from their parents, peers, friends, wider kin and community (e.g. *SB* XX 14285, 59 CE; *P. Bingen* 62, 89 CE; *P. Oxy*. II 263, 77 CE). It seem it was not unusual for even young children to face changes in their physical and social surroundings on a frequent basis. For example, before he had turned eight years old, Epaphroditus had been moved as a result of sale three times: the first sale was when he was one year old; at seven years old the second sale took place in Small Oasis some 200 kilometres away from Oxyrhynchos across the desert, where the third sale took place less than a year later, to a man whose was the secretary of the city (*grammateus poleos: P. Oxy*. LX 4058, 158–9 CE. See also *P. Amst* II 46, 217–227/8). Slave trade with children was very much part of the local economic milieu, and, for example, an Alexandrine lady interested in buying slave boys could write to a local businessman to arrange the matter (*P. Oxy*. XXXVIII 2860, 101–200 CE).

Most children and young people of slave status undoubtedly experienced enforced movement and travel at some point in their lives. Young people of free status, experience travel and mobility for a range of reasons and purposes – willing or otherwise. A primary example of this is a shepherd named Petemounis, mentioned to be a minor (under fourteen years of age), whose home was at the village of Kerkemounis in the upper toparchy, but who was pasturing in the neighbourhood of the town of Pela in the western toparchy, some fifteen kilometres from home. While this distance easily could have been covered on foot in half a day (perhaps a little longer with the sheep and goats) he is also mentioned occasionally to have tended his flock 'throughout the entire nome', that is, even much further away from home. For him, the rural areas of the Oxyrhynchite nome must have become quite familiar from an early age, along with the responsibility for the flock –

mentioned to consist of twelve sheep and three goats with their lambs and kids in 29 CE (*P. Oxy*. XXXVIII 2850).

Children travelling for 'fun', without any clearly defined reason are hard to locate in this material. Parents were likely quite reluctant to take their children with them if they needed to travel for business, trade or politics, as is evidenced by the number of cases in which we see parents writing back to their home with greetings to their children, but a primary example of this is the case of Theon. He was a boy in perhaps his earliest teens, who lived comfortably at his home estate with his parents and other household members outside Oxyrhynchos. But when he wished to travel with his father – who was to leave for a business trip to Alexandria – he was hindered by his parents, causing the boy to write about his embarrassment in a long and passionate letter, sent to his father after his 'deceitful' departure from the home farm (*P. Oxy*. I 119; 101–300 CE with Vuolanto 2017, 19–21). Unfortunately we cannot know what activity Theon supposed he was about to miss out on. How realistic were his chances of getting the result he wanted? Theon clearly was on good term with his parents, freely expressing himself and his passions – still he was not allowed to join his father. Even if we cannot know for sure, it would not be surprising to find this was a common experience for children of wealthy households in Roman Egypt.

Indeed, for most children travelling as a minor seems to have been most unusual. It was only by reaching majority in the early teens, that the sphere of living expanded especially for the children of the local elites. For them this was the time of reaching the juridical age of majority and enrolment into the gymnasium. To be registered meant also the right to attend to ephebic games. There were local games in Oxyrhynchos at least from the early third century onwards. Most importantly, however, teenage boys (*epheboi*, from fourteen to twenty years of age) would travel to other cities taking part in the games held in connection with the religious festivals. and some more prestigious occasions for competitions elsewhere. In the context of Oxyrhynchos, this most of all meant a hundred-kilometre trip upriver to Antinoopolis, to celebrate the Great Antinoeia festival with games set up by Hadrian to honour Antinous (*P. Oxy*. LXXIX5206, 233–4 CE; *P. Oxy*. LXXIX5209, 267 CE; *PSI* III 199, 203 CE).

Even more regularly, continuing one's studies beyond elementary education and studying under a *grammaticus*, would have required children, or adolescents, to move away from home. More modestly, this could have meant studies in Oxyrhynchos where the city employed a *grammaticus* in third century at the latest. Or, more ambitiously, young men were sent away from their homes, often to Alexandria, for higher education (e.g. *P. Oxy*. III 531, 101–200 CE; *P. Oxy*. XL 2912, 268–271 CE; *P. Oxy*. VIII 1160, 201–400 CE). In a letter from about 100 CE (*SB* XXII 15708, c. 100 CE), we hear about a family from Oxyrhynchos, where two brothers who were living and studying together in Alexandria were now awaiting a third, younger brother (identified as a *mikron*) to arrive after a journey of some 400 kilometres downriver. They were indeed far from home, in one of the biggest and liveliest cities in the Greco-Roman world and with a constant need of parental finance. Their parents appear also to have tried to supervise their children long-distance through letter-writing and occasional visits.

Other issues which could have given occasion for young people to travel away from their original homes related to different sorts of public activity. In a document from the year 325 CE (*P. Oxy*. LIV 3758, lines 156–180), we encounter an underage boy mentioned

as having travelled to 'oasis', apparently because of his (honorary) office as a 'land surveyor' (*geometrees*). This business trip would have been considerable even if the oasis here might denote 'only' the Fayum basin, some 100 kilometres away.

It would appear that at least some children and young people had a range of experiences of other cities beyond their home. We encounter also an Oxyrhynchite young man in his late teens in court in Alexandria because of misadministration of property during his minority (*PSI* IV 281, 141–3 CE. See also *PSI* X 1102, 271–2 CE). In one case a father, an Alexandrian citizen residing in Oxyrhynchos, takes his fourteen-year-old son, Theon, down the river from Oxyrhynchos to register him as an *ephebos* in Alexandria. There, the boy is involved in the symbolic and highly prestigious ceremony of having his hair cut in the Great Serapeum. This long journey with father and other family members, together with the solemn festivities must have made a lasting impression on the child (*P. Oxy*. LXIX 3463, 58 CE). There resided, indeed, many Alexandrian families with teenager boys in Oxyrhynchos (*P. Oxy*. XII 1451, 175 CE; *P. Oxy*. III 477, 132–133 CE and *P. Oxy*. IV 7333, 186 CE).

A singular case of a teenager being able to travel outside his home city is presented by a 'handsome and rich' seventeen-year-old youth from Oxyrhynchos, who was able to go around Egypt (the cities of Memphis and Pelusium are mentioned) with a certain Maximus, a high administrator and possibly prefect of Egypt. Maximus and the teenager were, moreover, criticized as having been 'shameless lovers' (*P. Oxy*. III 471, 101–200 CE). This example is difficult to examine, not least because of the nature of the suggestions of a sexual relationship between a seventeen- year-old and a powerful and well-connected older man. It is unclear whether and in what ways this suggestion is intended to accuse and shame (and which party), or whether it is intended to display a behaviour many well-known and powerful officials in Egypt in this period were engaging in: publicly associating themselves, by emulation, with what they deem to be the acceptable elite classical behaviours of 'their' heritage, the classical fifth century Athenian elites. It is likewise not clear whether the suggestion is true, or used (unpalatably to the present readers) as a means of enhancing social, political and cultural capital. All these latter cases depict rather well-heeled people, with links with the local urban elites in Oxyrhynchos. Moreover, all these free young travellers are male.

Conclusions

We want to highlight three features from our discussion of the material. First, children's perspectives and activities were at the very heart of the operation of the ancient city with its youth-based socio-political orders and structures, religions and economies – their presence in shaping the life of the ancient city is huge by modern comparisons. They were pivotal to the prosperity of the city, as well as of their families, largely through their work. Their roles in the continuity of familial, social and religious memory were crucial both in families and in public life, for the administration of the city and the perpetuation of the municipal elite. Without this focus on the expected transitional (and transformational) nature of youth and young people, the culture of the ancient city would have looked very different indeed. For all social levels, there were high expectations of young people. Mismatches between these expectations and reality are easy to imagine, but they were seldom documented.

On the other hand, there is not much trace of how children responded to the city scape of which they were such a fundamental part. This seems rather to be an obstacle created by the quality of our sources, which tend to provide us with the framework for children's agency rather than the specific choices and worlds that children experienced and interacted with. Yet we do catch glimpses of their agency in defining relationships between a family, or a local community, and their physical environment. Moreover, even if we may never know the extent to which young people interacted on a daily basis with people from different cultural or religious backgrounds, given the multi-ethnic background of slave children in Oxyrhynchos, we can be fairly certain that they did so at some level (see also Pudsey and Vuolanto in press with, e.g. Underwood 2014 on Goth families residing in Oxyrhynchos). Everyday interactions with adults and peers, free and unfree, and the responsibilities attached to agricultural and other physical work had very real implications.

The second point worth noting here is, that most of our written documentation refers to boys and young men. Interestingly, this discrepancy restricts itself mostly to the upper echelons of the local society. While it is clear that girls' and young women's involvement in the city was not deemed as worthy of documentation in some contexts, for instance in political and educational spheres and spaces, there are specific mention of girls and young women in particular in economic spheres, and in reference to slavery. We know of them being visible and involved in working life outside of their homes (see also Pudsey 2017; Pudsey and Vuolanto (in press); Vuolanto 2015). Clearly, much of the city was accessible to girls as well as to boys.

Our last point is that the ancient city cannot be separated from its environs; the imagined boundaries of the city were porous, and its inhabitants and visitors by necessity brought the *chora*, the surrounding fields and villages into the life of Oxyrhynchos, especially for enslaved and the elite male children. The ancient city was not mere scenery against which young people performed, or lived their lives, it was rather an active agent in some sort of shared experience of the world, and its changing nature was in symbiotic relationship with young people's values, transgressions, ideas and emotions. The ancient city of Oxyrhynchos was not merely a home to young people, what in fact made it a city *was* a particularly ancient combination of the large-scale presence, actions, viewpoints and concerns of so many young people, without whom all ancient cities would have been very different places.

Notes

1. This database is the result of an analysis of the over 7500 published papyri, inscriptions and material objects we have been able to identify (with the help of papyri.info) to originate from Oxyrhynchos and its administrative area. In building and developing our database we consciously avoided attributing modern concepts of, for instance, 'education' or 'child' to the material; rather, we allowed the material to dictate some of our elements of categorization, for example the keywords 'learning', 'work', 'peers' are borne of our reading of apprenticeship documents (see a fuller discussion of our database in Pudsey and Vuolanto in press).
2. The environment in physical remains, and in texts, hardly ever align and represent snapshots of physical space along different life-cycles. The life cycle of a building is typically much greater than that of an individual or family, and as such we cannot simply and straightforwardly map changes in textual descriptions of space onto the physical remains. See Baird and Pudsey (in press) with Baird 2014.

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank the anonymous reviewers for critically reading and commenting an earlier draft of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Abbreviations

Abbreviations for papyri follow the *Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic, and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca, and Tablets*, founding editors John F. Oates and William H. Willis, online at https://papyri.info/docs/checklist (read 3rd April 2021).

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