

# Roman birth rites of passage revisited

Véronique Dasen

In classical antiquity, as in most traditional societies, very young children, especially newborn babies, were subject to specific rituals associated with their particular liminal status, between two worlds – alive, but not yet fully social beings. Long believed to have left no trace, these inconspicuous actors of past societies are now part of a new field of research on childbirth and infancy within the broader field of childhood studies. The paucity of textual sources is compensated by an interdisciplinary approach confronting different types of evidence, especially archaeological. A renewed attention to babies' material culture is offering promising new insights on various practices, such as the use of breast pumps or of swaddling rings.<sup>1</sup> Results obtained for other periods and societies also allow useful transfers of questions on various topics, such as the function of babies' 'moulding' or the use of teething amulets.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I will explore the nature of the ambivalent status of newborn babies and examine how and to what extent Roman birth rites contributed to "making human" infants; I will also revisit the structure of these rites after the scheme conceptualized by A. van Gennep a century ago in *Les rites de passage* (Paris 1909), a seminal book widely used by anthropologists and classicists.<sup>3</sup> Van Gennep distinguished similar schemes in rites accompanying transitions in the life cycle, such as birth, coming of age, wedding, or death. He identified a tripartite structure composed of separation from one status, followed by an intermediate, liminal, period ending with rites of aggregation into a new status. The concept, often used as an epistemological tool to discuss initiation and maturation rites, has also been applied to birth rites in various cultures, though more rarely in Antiquity, partly because of the shortage of evidence.<sup>4</sup>

A better understanding of the structure and flexibility of birth rites of passage is important not only as a contribution to ancient rituals, but also to childhood and gender studies. The reconstruction of early childhood is a neglected part of the history of normative and culturally conditioned values and behaviours. Attitudes to infants also reveal a society's capacity to manage life crises.

I will thus first review the steps leading from delivery to the ceremony of the *dies lustricus* 8 or 9 days later, commonly described as the second, social birth of the child, with the help of

1. The pioneering work of G. Coulon, *L'enfant en Gaule romaine* (Paris 1994, revised edn. 2004), provides a wealth of material from Gallo-Roman society, as does the exhibition catalogue on Roman Gaul edited by D. Gourevitch, A. Moirin and N. Rouquet, *Maternité et petite enfance dans l'Antiquité romaine* (cat. expo Bourges) (Bourges 2003). On breast pumps, see N. Rouquet, "Les biberons, les tire-lait ou les tribulations d'une tribulation peu commune ...", *ibid.* 171-77; on swaddling rings, *ibid.* 209-10. On coming into life in Antiquity, see also V. Dasen (ed.), *Naissance et petite enfance dans l'Antiquité. Colloque Fribourg 2001* (Fribourg 2004); J. Neils and J. Oakley (edd.), *Coming of age in ancient Greece. Images of childhood from the classical past* (New Haven, CT 2004); A. Coenen and J. Rafter (edd.), *Constructions of childhood in ancient Greece and Italy* (Hesperia Suppl. 41, 2007); V. Dasen, "Étapes et circonstances occasionnelles de la vie. Naissance et petite enfance, Grèce," in *ThesCRA VI* forthcoming; O. de Cazanove, "Naissance et petite enfance, Rome," *ibid.*
2. E.g., M. F. Morel and C. Rollet, *Des bébés et des hommes. traditions et modernité des sous-âge tout-petits* (Paris 2000); D. Bonnet and L. Pourchez (edd.), *Du sein au rite dans l'enfance* (Ramonville 2007)
3. *The rites of passage*, transl. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee (Chicago 1960); J. Hainard and R. Kaehli (edd.), *Naître, vivre et mourir, actualité de van Gennep. Essais sur les rites de passage* (Neuchâtel 1981).
4. On initiation rites, see, e.g., M. W. Padilla, *Rites of passage in ancient Greece. literature, religion, society* (Lewisburg, ME 1999). Birth rites are less often discussed: "birth was a ritual, although its structure can only be dimly perceived", explains R. Garland, *The Greek way of life* (London 1990) 104. The concept is usefully applied by, e.g., P. Garnsey, "Child-rearing in ancient Italy," in D. I. Kertzer and R. P. Saller (edd.), *The family in Italy from antiquity to the present* (New Haven, CT 1991) 48-65 (repr. in *Cities, peasants and food in classical antiquity. Essays in social and economic history* [Cambridge 1998] 253-71), but this is not systematic. B. Rawson, *Children and childhood in Roman Italy* (Oxford 2003) 95-113, details the different steps surrounding birth in Rome, but without referring to the structure of the rites, nor to van Gennep.