CHILDREN IN ANTIQUITY
GREECE & EGYPT
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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*Children in Antiquity*
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INTRODUCTION

Childhood in antiquity was both remarkably different and, in some ways, remarkably similar to childhood as we know it today. While infant mortality was shockingly high in the ancient Mediterranean, and there were marked differences in the lives and experiences of boys and girls, rich and poor, and of free and slave children, the creativity and playfulness of youth is universal. Play is one area where human instinct and creativity offers direct parallels between the ancient past and our own present.

This display of artefacts from the Nicholson Museum collection explores aspects of children’s lives in ancient Greece and Egypt. Themes of birth and infancy, youth, education, play, work, religion and death and burial are brought together to portray the day-to-day experience of childhood in the ancient world.
BIRTH & INFANCY

“Take a wife while you are young,
That she make a son for you;
She should bear for you while you are youthful,
It is proper to make people.
Happy is the man whose people are many,
He is saluted on account of his progeny”
Excerpt from the Instructions of Any, 1550–1070 BC.

So begins the Instructions of Any, an Egyptian teaching text dating to the New Kingdom (1550–1070 BC). Further evidence for the desire for children is found in objects known as ‘fertility figurines’, made of faience or clay, that were presented at temples, tombs and house shrines in the hope that the gods and the dead would help to ensure healthy pregnancy. Birth in the ancient world was a dangerous process: complications were not well understood and basic hygiene was often lacking, which meant that childbirth was a risk for both mother and baby. Special amulets were made and magical spells spoken for defence against demons and other malevolent beings that were thought to bring illness and death. These amulets were worn by mothers, infants and older children. Gods and goddesses, such as Bes and Taweret in Egypt, or Asklepieios, Artemis and Demeter in Greece, were also called upon for help and protection.

But, having survived childbirth, not all infants were subsequently accepted into the family; in ancient Greek society this might be a result of the deformity or illegitimacy of the child, or simply the economic stress of adding another mouth to feed. Such unwanted babies were sometimes abandoned in public places in the hope that they would be adopted. In Egypt, the burial of children who had lived with severe medical conditions or deformities indicates that infanticide was not an option and that all infants were raised regardless of their state of health. Childless couples were also encouraged to adopt orphans.

The existence of texts with details of contraceptive remedies indicate that couples in antiquity tried to manage family size and women breastfed until their offspring were weaned, probably in their second or third year, because this is a natural way of preventing pregnancy. Ceramic spouted feeders were also used to give infants supplementary water, diluted honey or even liquidised solids.
Rattles were used to calm and amuse fretful infants, with Aristotle commenting that these were given ‘to children in order that while occupied with this they may not break any of the furniture, for young things cannot keep still!’ (Politics VIII, 1340b).

In Egypt, the most common mother-and-child pairing in art was that of the goddess Isis and her son Horus, an image which is said to have inspired images of Mary and Jesus millennia later. Isis was forced to hide Horus from his uncle, the murderous god Seth, and her nurturing nature made her the model of ideal motherhood. Children were also identified with Horus (known as Harpokrates by the Greeks), who is depicted as a typical child with a sidelock of hair and his finger to his mouth, or holding scorpions and snakes while standing on crocodiles – showing his immunity to the animals that threatened mortal toddlers on a daily basis.
As children grew, successive stages of their lives were marked by rituals or rites of passage. In Egypt, this included shaving the growing infant's head and placing the hair into mud balls. Later, in order to mark the child's transition to adulthood, his or her hair was cut and the sidelock that distinguished the child was presented to the gods, perhaps to thank them for allowing individuals to reach adulthood. Adult elite males remained bald or wore wigs over their natural hair, while their wives wore heavy, elaborate hairpieces.

In Greece, children participated in religious festivals, such as the Anthesteria or Arkteia, that marked particular life stage transitions, in this case, respectively the end of infancy or the approach of puberty. In the years immediately following puberty, Greek boys from wealthy families were often courted by older aristocratic males to establish a paederastic relationship; this functioned not only as a sexual partnership but was also considered to provide the youth with a male mentor and role model beyond his own family.

In addition to protective amulets, children might wear earrings, bracelets and rings. Young children are often depicted naked, but their nudity is probably more an iconographic indicator of youth than a reflection of reality, as suggested by the discovery of child-sized garments and footwear at Egyptian archaeological sites. Greek art also represents young males without clothing in order to present the ideal athletic form. Adolescent Greek girls were shown with long uncovered hair and were attired in a long dress belted at chest level; on marriage their hair was covered up and they adopted a waist girdle.

The duration of youth or adolescence varied in antiquity according to gender, socio-economic class and cultural norms. For the Egyptians, it probably ended at puberty (13–15 years of age), whereas Greek boys of elite families were not considered to reach adulthood until 18 years of age. Greek girls had a much shorter adolescence, often being married in their mid-teens to men twice their age and becoming mothers themselves shortly afterwards.
In contrast to the modern Western world, formal education in ancient Greece was reserved for privileged boys with wealthy parents who could afford to send their sons to private tutors, usually from the age of seven onwards. No minimum period of schooling was observed, and the length of a child’s education was determined simply by how long his family could continue to pay.

Boys were taught literacy, numeracy, music and physical training. Rote learning was the method of instruction, and writing skill was acquired by copying out the alphabet as well as other texts that contained appropriate moral lessons.

Exposure to the discipline of musical and physical training, and the emulation of models of behaviour found in the works of the great poets such as Homer, were also believed to develop and instil desirable character traits in the young. Such education prepared the boys to enter musical, athletic and writing competitions, usually held as part of religious festivals, and on these occasions the boys competed against each other for prizes.

Girls did not normally receive a formal education, though they may have learned literacy and numeracy second-hand from literate members of their family. One exception is the Greek state of Sparta, where girls of Spartan citizen families were trained in music, dance and athletics in the belief that strong women would produce healthy children who would, in turn, be future warriors.

It has been estimated that between two and five percent of the ancient Egyptian population were able to read and write. To become a scribe was considered a high achievement and elite men commissioned statues and statuettes of themselves in typical scribal poses, with a papyrus roll stretched across their knees and sometimes with a reed pen in their hands. Some have stylised rolls of fat on their abdomen symbolising the wealth and status that came with having a role as a scribe or administrator. The extent of women’s literacy is unknown, but they were not formally educated and are never shown as scribes.
WORK

Child labour made an important contribution to the ancient economy, with the type of tasks undertaken, and the amount of work expected of children, varying according to the individual’s age and gender, and also the socio-economic level of the child’s family.

Preparation for working-life began in early childhood, with the ancient Greek philosopher Plato commenting that ‘... if a boy is to be a good farmer, or again, a good builder, he should play, in one case at building toy houses, in the other at farming, and both should be provided by their tutors with miniature tools on the pattern of real ones.’ (Laws 1.643B)

From the age of about seven, many girls would have been put to work, either in the context of the family home or as servants in another household.

Their duties included making textiles for clothing and home furnishings, looking after younger children, gathering water from the local well or spring, and preparing food. Boys, meanwhile, tended livestock and crops, and worked as apprentice potters, masons, cobblers and metalworkers.

Slavery in the ancient Mediterranean was common, with slaves often being war captives obtained from foreign conquest. While slave children might be set to work in the domestic, agricultural, pastoral and industrial contexts, many suffered the far worse fate of being sent down the mines, or were sold into prostitution. The experiences of these children, just as those of many young people in the developing world today, must have been brutal and their lives often short as a result.

At the other end of the spectrum, in Egypt, elite and royal children were sent to scribal school and given military training or lessons appropriate to their future roles as priests, administrators, overseers, mayors, local governors, royal tutors, and architects.
Children and play go hand-in-hand, no matter when and where in space and time they are found. Indeed, Plato's observation, that young children 'have games which come by natural instinct; and they generally invent them of themselves whenever they meet together' (Laws 7.794A), remains as true today as it has ever been.

Although the mass production of toys and the commercialisation of play did not exist in antiquity, we can still recognise many of the favourite playthings of ancient Mediterranean children. One of the first toys a child might have was a rattle made of fired clay. Balls of various sizes were common toys. Small balls were often made of clay and large balls could be made from inflated animal bladders. There were also yo-yos, spinning tops, hoops and, for girls, clay or rag dolls. Some games and toys emulated and modelled future adult roles and responsibilities, such as articulated models of women grinding corn or miniature cooking pots.

So-called 'knucklebones' were highly sought after by children: these were the oddly shaped ankle bones of sheep and goats. They were used in the game ‘fivestones’, still played today but now more commonly called ‘jacks’. The aim of the game was to throw the knucklebones in the air and catch them on the back of the hand; any knucklebones that fell to the ground then had to be picked up without letting fall those on the back of the hand. Knucklebones might also be used as dice, with the differently shaped faces representing different values.

Dice and gaming counters were used to play board games, with the ancient Greek writer Pollux describing a game reminiscent of draughts or chequers today. (Pollux Onomastikon 9.98). Senet was a popular board game in Egypt.

A great number of miniature animal figurines have been found in the ancient Mediterranean, many of which may have been used as children’s playthings. Real animals too were doubtless children’s companions, especially dogs, birds, hares or rabbits, goats and cats.
Religion permeated all aspects of life in the ancient Mediterranean world. The gods were believed to protect children, to oversee their growth and life-stage transitions, and to require their worship and service in their sanctuaries. It is not, therefore, surprising that terracotta figurines of children are commonly found in sanctuaries, where they had been dedicated to the deities in return for their oversight of the young.

In ancient Athens, as in Egypt, children began their participation in religious festivals early in life. It was in their third year that they first joined in celebration of the Anthesteria, a festival of Dionysos, held in the spring. On this occasion the children drank wine from miniature jugs, called choes. In ancient Egyptian Thebes (modern Luxor), children participated in local festivals, accompanying processions, dancing and carrying offerings for the gods.

As he or she grew, the child’s role in the religious life of the community expanded to include assisting in sacrificial or divinatory rituals and performing in dances or choruses in the gods’ sanctuaries. It was thus in the religious context that boys and girls were increasingly introduced to a wider world beyond the confines of family and home.

Child gods were also an important part of the religious landscape: in Egypt Horus was a commonly worshipped infant (Horus-the-Child or Hor-pa-khered, later Harpokrates), as was Re (in his daily rebirth as the rising sun) and the musician-god Ihy. In Greece Eros, Dionysos, Hermes, Zeus and Apollo were some of the most popular divine offspring.
Death was ever-present in the ancient world, with infant mortality reaching perhaps as high as 50% in the first year of life; the result of birthing or perinatal complications, poor hygiene, disease, infection, and also the exposure of unwanted children in Greece and Rome.

Though burial of older children and adults was generally prohibited within settlement areas, babies were often interred among the living by being placed under the floor of the family home; the body might first be enclosed within a large empty storage jar before being deposited in the ground. Older children were inhumed in pits, sometimes in cemeteries reserved for the burial of the young. Unlike adults, they were not cremated. In Egypt, their bodies might be mummified before burial, as in the case of the boy Horus (who can be visited in the Nicholson Museum’s Egyptian exhibition *Death Magic*). Poorer Egyptian families who could not afford the expense of mummifying their offspring still placed them carefully in the ground, using fish baskets, bundles of reeds or linen boxes instead of coffins.

Grave gifts were often placed in children’s tombs. Very common items were baked clay animal figurines and miniature vessels. Scholars debate whether these were toys or symbolically represented commodities needed by the deceased in the underworld. Older children were also given gendered items, such as mirrors and spindle whorls for girls or arrowheads and athletic equipment for boys, pointing to the adult roles these individuals would never attain. In Egypt, drinking vessels and offerings of grain in shallow bowls might also be included in the burial, suggesting that the children might need food and drink supplies in the afterlife.

Formal and lasting commemoration of children’s death did not begin in Greece until the late 5th century BC, with the appearance of tombstones above their graves and the child’s image painted on ceramic white ground lekythoi. Children in Egypt had no permanent grave markers, but elite juveniles could be included in tomb decoration or on mortuary stelai along with their parents, and were thereby able to share in their access to offerings and the afterlife.
CATALOGUE OF OBJECTS

Birth & Infancy

Baby feeding bottles

1-2. Terracotta ceramic juglets with side spout. Late Cypriot period (IIA-IIIC: 1340-1100BC) from Tomb IV, Kouklia Asproyi, Cyprus. NM55.53; NM55.54

3. Black glaze juglet with side spout. From Athens, Greece. NM48.19

Mothers and nurses holding infants

4. Limestone figurine of mother and child. Late 18th Dynasty (circa 1400BC), from Amarna, Egypt. NM62.1008

5. Terracotta figurine of a woman with child. Late Cypriot period (1450-1200BC), from Tamassos, Cyprus. NM47.347

6. Terracotta figurine of a woman breastfeeding a baby. Hellenistic period (323-30BC). NM66.89


8. Terracotta figurine of a woman breastfeeding a baby. Hellenistic period (323-30BC). NM66.72

9. Terracotta figurine of a woman breastfeeding a baby. Late Antique period (AD400-800). NM66.83

Egyptian goddesses of birth and childhood

10. Limestone kohl pot depicting Taweret. 18th Dynasty (1546-1292BC) from Diospolis Parva or Abadiyeh, Egypt. NM00.107

11. Faience amulet of Taweret in the form of a hippopotamus with lion's legs and a crocodile tail. From Egypt. NM64.472.5

12. Rare figurine of a woman squatting in the process of giving birth. Possibly New Kingdom Period (1550-1077BC), from Abydos, Egypt. NM25.59.9

13. Faience amulet of Isis nursing infant Horus. Roman period (30BC-AD200), Egypt. NM75.102

14. Bronze figurine of Isis holding infant Horus. Roman period (30BC-AD200), Egypt. NM2015.15

15. Faience amulet of Isis nursing infant Horus. Possibly Roman period (30BC-AD200), Egypt. NMR.196

Greco-Roman goddesses of birth and childhood

16. Marble head of the Roman goddess Diana (Greek Artemis). 1st to 3rd century AD Italy. NMR.995
Rattle

17. Ceramic rattle. From the Royal cemetery at Ur, Iraq. NM35.90

Bes: Egyptian god, protector of children

18-19. Terracotta figurines of Bes. Greco-Roman period (100BC-AD100), Egypt. NM71.16; NM71.14

20. Faience amulet of Bes. Possibly Late Period (672-332 BC), Egypt. NM84.74

21. Faience amulet of Bes. From Egypt, NMR.192

22. Faience amulet of the face of Bes. 22nd Dynasty (945-715BC), from Abydos, Egypt. NM25.47.1

23. Terracotta amulet mould of the face of Bes. From Egypt. NM64.287

The child god Horus

24-26. Terracotta figurines of Horus (Harpokrates). Ptolemaic – Roman Period (305BC-AD395), Egypt. NM71.9; NM2012.21; NM75.19

27. Bronze figurine of Horus with side lock. Ptolemaic – Roman Period (305BC-AD395), Egypt. NM75.109

28. Mummified baby crocodile from Egypt. NM84.4

Sculpted children


30. Marble sculpture of a young girl, head fragment. Hellenistic period (323-30BC). NM66.71

31. Marble sculpture of a boy’s head from a Roman sarcophagus. 3rd century AD. NMR.980

YOUTH

32. Wooden statue of a girl. New Kingdom period (1550-1069BC), Egypt. NM82.4

Boys and love gifts

33-34. Terracotta figurines of cockerels. 600-350BC, from Greece. NM94.11; NM62.938

35. Marble sculpture of a long haired youth’s face from a Roman sarcophagus. 3rd century AD, Italy. NMR.979.2
Dressing up


37-39. Bronze bracelets. Possibly Roman. NMR.469; NMR.517.1; NMR.517.2

40-41. Small finger rings in silver and blue faience. From Egypt NM63.218; NMR.162.2

42. Hand-formed mud or clay ball probably containing hair from a child, with impressions stamped on surface. 19th Dynasty (1295-1186BC), from Tomb 1401 Abydos, Egypt. NM25.30

43-47. Amuletic necklaces made using gold, silver, faience, shell and semi-precious stones including lapis lazuli, carnelian, amethyst. 1st Intermediate to Late Period (2213-332BC), Egypt. NM68.25; NM64.572; NM67.63; NM25.23; NM13.12

Sculpted Youth

48. Fragmentary marble sculpture of a youthful male, Apollo. circa 50BC-AD50. NM2012.10

EDUCATION

49. Red figure calyx krater depicting stages of the Athenian male's life. The lower register depicts running boys while in the upper register men drink-and enjoy music at a symposium. Late 5th century BC (425-400BC), Greece. NM50.1

Musical education

50. Fragmentary bone flute pipes with incised horizontal bands at the ends. NMR.699.1-4

51. Lucanian red figure skyphos fragment depicting a youth playing the double flute, note the face straps. Attributed to the Palermo Painter, 420-390BC, South Italy. NM97.172

Literacy education

52. Wax writing-tablet fragment with traces of ancient Greek letters on surface. Roman period (30BC-AD300), Egypt. NMR.296

53. A letter from a father to his son, black ink on a pottery fragment (ostrakon), written in ancient Greek. Possibly 3rd century AD (AD200-300), from Thebes, Egypt. NM36.59

54. Reed pen with ink stain. Roman period (30BC-AD395), from Behnasa, Egypt. NM00.183

55. Bronze ink well. Roman period (30BC-AD395), from Hu, Egypt. NM00.142

Physical Education

56. Plaster cast of a haltere, stone jumping weight. The original weight was found at Olympia, Greece. NM30.117
WORK

Slave children

57. Bronze head of an African boy slave. NMR.580.1

58. Plaster reproduction of a Linear B tablet listing slave women and children. Late Bronze Age, (1400-1200BC) Knossos, Crete. NM62.871

Girls’ work: textile working

59. Athenian red figure kylix, cup, depicting a woman spinning. By the Eucharides painter, 500-475BC, from Vulci, Etruria. NM46.40

60. Wooden reproduction of a spindle with whorl. NM2001.2

61-63. Terracotta spindle whorls decorated with incised geometric patterns. Early Cypriot period (2500-1900BC), from Cyprus. NM48.276; NM47.431; NM47.430

64. Terracotta pyramidal loom weight, possibly Roman. NMR.685.1

65. Stone circular loom weight, from Greece. NM48.417

Boys’ work: apprentice potters and cobblers

66-68. Model coarse ware dishes made of Nile silt. Old Kingdom period (2686-2181BC), Egypt. NM64.90.1; NM64.90.3; NM64.90.10

69. Red leather shoe of a child, from Egypt. NMR.291.1

Elite boys work: scribes of the future

70. Limestone sculpture of a seated scribe with a papyrus scroll across lap. The base inscription gives the scribe’s name Mija(?), son of the scribe Iny. New Kingdom Period (1550-1069BC), Egypt. NMR.38

PLAY

71-73. Terracotta model of a chariot and wheels. 772-612BC, from Tell Brak, Syria. NM50.315; NM50.316; NM50.317

74. Terracotta horse and rider figurine. 800-700BC, Greece. NM47.215.1

Animal Figurines

75. Terracotta head of a duck. 18th Dynasty (1543-1292BC), Egypt. NM62.1028

76-77. Terracotta figurines of birds. Possibly from Greece or Cyprus. NM64.280; NM46.35

78. Terracotta figurine of a seated animal, possibly a cow. 600-500BC, Greece. NM54.39
79. Terracotta figurine of a horse with rider, missing head. Hellenistic period (323-30BC), possibly from Turkey. NM64.42

80. Terracotta head of a horse. Cypro-Archaic period (800-450BC), possibly from Egypt. NMR.60

**Playing Games**

81-82. Knucklebones. From Tell Arpachiyah, Iraq and Tel Lakhish, Israel. NM35.18; NM52.193

83. Bone dice. Roman period (30BC-AD395) from Hu, Egypt. NM00.139.1-2

84-85. Glass gaming counters. 3rd century BC to 1st century AD (300BC-AD100). NM51.73; NM51.349.14

86. Blue faience gaming-piece, possibly for playing Senet. From Amarna, Egypt. NM62.1000

87-88. Stone and terracotta gamesmen. 2250-1750BC, from Harappa, Pakistan. NM48.57; NM48.58

**RELIGION**

89. Athenian red figure neck amphora depicting a boy riding on a dolphin. This figure is possibly Melikertes-Palaimon, a child hero worshipped at the sanctuary at Isthmia near Corinth. By the Athena-Bowdoin Painter. 500-475BC. NM70.2

**Child gods**

90-93. Terracotta figurines of the child god Horus, also known as Hor-pa-khered in Egyptian and Harpokrates in Greek. Ptolemaic – Roman Period (305BC-AD395), Egypt. NM71.10; NM71.7; NM71.8; NM1998.20

**Festivals**

94. Athenian red figure chous depicting a girl and dog. Greek children from their third year drank wine from the miniature chous jug at the Anthesteria festival. 425-400BC, Greece. NM46.49

95. Athenian red figure volute krater fragment depicting a sanctuary, most probably during the Anthesthera festival: the mask of Dionysos and festal branches are attached to a wooden column while a flute player pipes and women dance to either side. Circa 475BC, Greece. NM56.33

**Dedicating children to the Gods**

96. Stone sculpture of a youth, head fragment possibly from a votive statue. Graeco-Roman period (323BC-AD395), from Heliopolis, Egypt. NM54.22

97. Fragmentary base of a marble statue of a child, possibly from a votive sculpture often found in sanctuary sites throughout Greece. Hellenistic or Early Roman period (300BC-AD100). NM2012.17
DEATH & BURIAL

98-100. White ground lekythoi, bottles of perfumed oil, used as grave goods for older children and adults. 470-400BC, from Athens, Greece. NM53.26; NM48.15; NM49.6

Grave offerings

101-105. Greek and South Italian miniature vessels: Athenian black glaze ribbed lekythos, NM98.101; Corinthian skyphos NM62.820; South Italian kantharos NM2012.7; Spartan cup NM48.345.12; Corinthian aryballos NM48.302.2

106-108. Egyptian calcite miniature vessels from the Old to Middle Kingdom periods (2686-1650BC): shallow dishes NM84.40; NM84.41; footed jar NM56.41

Burial

109. Portion of a young infant’s skeletal remains, ribs and spine, preserved in soil and set in a bed of plaster during the excavation process. Neolithic period, (9000-3000BC) from the Tell of Jericho Tell. NM53.541.77

110. Mummy of a boy identified as a male called Horus. Early 2nd century AD, Thebes, Upper Egypt NMR.26.1

Commemorating the Dead

111. Roman funerary monument inscribed "Publicus [set this up for] Primus, who lived nine years and three months." 1st-4th century AD, from Cumae, Italy. NMR.1068