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**HOPING FOR CONTINUITY**

**CHILDHOOD, EDUCATION AND  
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## Blessing or Portent? Multiple Births in Ancient Rome

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Many factors conditioned ancient attitudes to children. During the last decade, a number of studies have carefully explored the status of different categories of children, legitimate or illegitimate, freeborn or slaves, biological, adopted or surrogate, designated by various terms (like *uerna*, *alumnus*, *delicia*).<sup>1</sup> Children born simultaneously – twins, triplets, quadruplets and so on – also form a special category of offspring. These births represent a rare and unexpected event causing ambivalent reactions. They denote an excess which can be associated to various degrees with notions of abundance, fecundity and prosperity, or, on the contrary, with transgression, disorder and death. Different elements influence these attitudes: the sex of the children (both male or female, or of different sex), the extent of their resemblance (identical or non-identical twins), and their number. Moreover, twins and other multiple births do not seem to have produced the same feelings. The aim of this paper is to analyse the reasons for these contrasting views in relation to the medical discourses going back to the Hippocratic and to Aristotle. This viewpoint offers a valuable means to approach collective representations and throws an unexpected light on the status of children born simultaneously both in Rome and in the Classical world in general.

### The status of twins

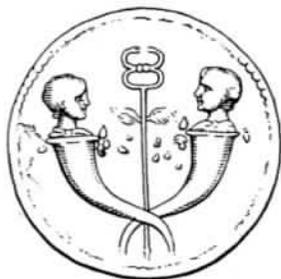
The birth of two children at a time seems to have been generally welcomed in the Roman world as a sign of divine favour.<sup>2</sup> Tacitus defines the birth of twins as 'a rare felicity, even in modest households'; he adds that Drusus delighted his father the emperor Tiberius when he had twin sons: he says that this

\* This paper was initially presented at the symposium *Ancient and Medieval Childhood Reconsidered* held at the Finnish Institute in Rome, *Institutum Romanum Finlandiae*, Villa Lante, 14–15 January 2005.

<sup>1</sup> E.g. H. S. NIELSEN, 'Quasi-kin, quasi-adoption and the Roman family', in M. CORBIER (ed.), *Adoption et fosterage*, Paris 1999, 249–62; C. LAES, 'Desperately different? *Delicia* children in the Roman household', in D. L. BALCH – C. OSIEK (eds), *Early Christian Families in Context: an Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, Cambridge 2003, 298–324; V. DASEN – D. LETT – M.-F. MOREL – C. ROLLET, 'Dix ans de travaux sur l'enfance', in *Enfances. Bilan d'une décennie de recherche, Annales de démographie historique*, 2001:2, 5–100; V. DASEN – S. DUCATE-PAARMANN, 'La naissance et la petite enfance dans l'Antiquité. Bibliographie sélective', in V. DASEN (ed.), *Naissance et petite enfance dans l'Antiquité. Actes du colloque de Fribourg, 28 novembre-1er décembre 2001* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, 203), Fribourg 2004, 377–405; B. RAWSON, *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy*, Oxford 2003.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of the reception of twins in the Greco-Roman world, see V. DASEN, *Jumeaux, jumelles dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine*, Kilchberg 2005.

'affected the emperor with so much pleasure that he could not refrain from boasting to the Fathers that never before had twins been born to a Roman of the same eminence'.<sup>3</sup> To celebrate the event, Tiberius had a sestertius coined for Drusus in 22-23 AD with the busts of the children emerging from cornucopiae surrounding a *caduceus*, symbols of abundance and prosperity (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1:** A sestertius coined for Drusus in 22-23 AD with the busts of the children emerging from cornucopiae (AE, Rome, Tiberius. *RIC I*<sup>2</sup> 97, no. 42. Drawing after A. B. Cook, *Zeus*, II, Cambridge 1925, 441, fig. 340).

Onomastics confirm that twins were very favoured in Rome. Latin *praenomina* and *cognomina* often refer to twin pairs.<sup>4</sup> One of the children may be named Geminus or Gemellus. The sons of Drusus were thus called Tiberius Iulius Germanicus and Tiberius Iulius Nero Gemellus. Some pairs combine Geminus with Didymus, the Latin form of the Greek Didymos, the twin, as on a commemorative inscription of the second century offered by Gemellus to his beloved brother Didymus.<sup>5</sup>

The children could also receive names evoking the complementary and inseparable nature of the twins, such as Atilianus and Antiatilianus, two ten-year-old slaves in Roman Britain,<sup>6</sup> or Sextus Coelius Canus ('white') and Sextus Coelius Niger ('black'), who entered the senate of Vienne in France at the age of 77, their lives being marked by their *pietas* and *concordia*.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the children of Antony and Cleopatra were called Alexander Helios ('the sun') and Cleopatra Selene ('the moon').<sup>8</sup> These names may also have referred to Egyptian religious concepts. The sun and the moon were embodied by the goddess Tefnut and her brother Shu, called *htr*, 'twins'.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Tac. *ann.* 2, 84.

<sup>4</sup> See H. SOLIN, *Namenpaare. Eine Studie zur römischen Namengebung*, Helsinki 1990, esp. 64-7; F. MENCACCI, *I fratelli amici. La rappresentazione dei gemelli nella cultura romana*, Venezia 1996.

<sup>5</sup> *CIL VI* 37391, 'Dis man(ibus)/ Didymo/ fecit Gemellus/fratri suo/karissimo'; SOLIN, *cit.* n. 4, 75 (fig.); See also *CIL VI* 28119 Clodia Gemella and Clodia Didyme.

<sup>6</sup> *RIB I* 560 'Dis manibus/Atil[i]an(us) e[t] Antiat[i]lianus an(norum) X Protus an(norum) XII/Pompeius/Optatus do/minus f(aciendum) c(uravit)'; B. CRISTIAN, *L'affection pour les enfants dans les épitaphes de la Bretagne romaine*, Mémoire de latin, Université de Neuchâtel, 1999, 63 and 82 ([www.unine.ch/antic/MLCristian.pdf](http://www.unine.ch/antic/MLCristian.pdf)).

<sup>7</sup> *CIL XII* 5864, 'Sex(to) Coelio Volt(inia tribu) Cano [Sex(to) Coelio Vol(tinia tribu) Nigro] quaest(ori) / Primus libert(us) sev(iri) / Hic et frater propter singularem et in / suos pietatem et inter se concordiam / quam in consortione iucundissima / annum LXXVII agunt. Ab ordine / decurionatu digni iudicati sunt / quam dexteritatem decurionum / munificentia remunauerunt / posito simulacro Viennae argenteo / (sestertium) n(ummum) (ducentorum milium)'; A. PELLETIER, 'Les inscriptions viennoises des jumeaux Coelii et le recrutement des décurions en Gaule', *RAN* 33 (2000) 2-7.

<sup>8</sup> Plut. *Ant.* 87.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J. BAINES, 'Egyptian twins', *Orientalia* 54 (1985) 461-82, esp. 476f.

Other names present variants on a common theme, stressed by similar assonances, such as Rhode and Rhodope, on the theme of the rose, *rhodos*.<sup>10</sup> The names may also indicate the talents of the twins: a first century inscription mention twin *cantrices* with names alluding to their profession: Chelys ('the lyre') and Thelxis ('the charm' of singing).<sup>11</sup> Some names refer to divine pairs. The most favoured are those of Amphion and Zethos, models of filial *pietas* and of fraternal complementarity.<sup>12</sup> Unexpectedly, Castor and Pollux are very rare, and, more logically, no pair is named after Romulus and Remus, though Romulus was a common Roman name.<sup>13</sup> More rare names demonstrate the refined culture of the master, such as those of the slaves called Calais and Zetes after the Boreadai.<sup>14</sup>

The most evocative names are those given by the dictator Sulla to his twin children: 'He named the male child Faustus, and the female Fausta', says Plutarch, 'for the Romans call what is auspicious and joyful *faustum*'.<sup>15</sup> It was a bold choice because these names do not belong to the traditional repertoire of the Corneli; it was also unusual to give a *praenomen* to a woman. The birth of twins confirmed the Fortune of Sulla who added the *cognomen* Felix, 'happy', a few years later in 82. It may be noted that he restored the temple of Fortuna in Praeneste where the cult statue depicted the goddess breast-feeding Jupiter and Juno, twins of different sex, like the dictator's children.<sup>16</sup>

On several occasions the elite used the references to mythical twins to enhance its prestige. The family of Marcus Aurelius twice had twins. The coinage commemorates the first pair, probably two boys, born on 7 March 149. An aureus repeats the motif of the cornucopia used for Tiberius' grandsons; the inscription, TEMPORVM FELICITAS, refers to a new era of prosperity (Fig. 2).<sup>17</sup> Conceived in 148, the year of the celebration of the ninth centenary of Rome, the children evoked the benevolent attention of the gods for Romulus and Remus, and hence for the successful destiny of the *Urbs*. A similar inscription SAECVLI FELICIT(as), is found on another coin. The twins are sitting on a kind of throne, crowned with stars which associate them with the Dioscouroi.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Warsaw, National Museum, Gallery of Ancient Art 143417; *CIL* VI 25429, 'Duabus gemellis / Rhode et Rhodope / contubernalibus / carissimis fecerunt / Hermes et Mystes / Aegisthi Aug(usti) lib(erti) suis / et sibi posterisque suis / memoriae Flaviae Auitae feliciter'; See also *CIL* VI 8434 Rhodo and Rhodinus.

<sup>11</sup> *CIL* VI 37783 (columbarium), 'Thelxis Cottia(e?) vChelys Cottiae / sorores gemellae amantissimae / cantrices carae utraeque suei[s]'.  
<sup>12</sup> *CIL* VI 21992, 'D M / M. Mannei Amphionis / M Manneius Zethus / frater gemino / carissimo [...]' ; MENCACCI, *cit.* n. 4, 132-4. SOLIN (*cit.* n. 4, 9, 14f.) has identified 105 isolated Amphion, 85 Zethos, and twelve pairs from the time of Augustus to the 2nd century AD.

<sup>13</sup> SOLIN, *cit.* n. 4, 11-18; On the eviction of Remus in onomastics and in the iconography, see J. P. SMALL, 'Romulus et Remus', in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, vol. 7, Zürich 1994, 639-44, esp. 643f.

<sup>14</sup> *CIL* VI 7426, 'Zetes et Calais / duo fratres/gemelli obierunt/amantes'; SOLIN, *cit.* n. 4, 7 (fig.), 17f.; MENCACCI, *cit.* n. 4, 134f.

<sup>15</sup> Plut. *Sull.* 34, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Cic. *div.* 2, 85; On the restoration of the temple by Sulla, see J. CHAMPEAUX, *Fortuna. Recherches sur le culte de la Fortune à Rome et dans le monde romain des origines à la mort de César II*, Rome 1987, 216-36.

<sup>17</sup> AV, aureus, *RIC* III 48, no. 185; AE, sesterce and dupondius, *RIC* III 133, no. 857; 134, no. 859.

<sup>18</sup> AR, denarius, *RIC* III 95, no. 509.



**Fig. 2:** An aureus commemorating the first twins of Marcus Aurelius (AV, *RIC* III 48, no. 185; Drawing after A. B. COOK, *Zeus*, II, Cambridge 1925, 441, fig. 341).



**Fig. 3:** A coin celebrating the birth of L. Aurelius Commodus, the future emperor Commodus, and his brother T. Aurelius Fulvus Antoninus (AE, as, *RIC* III 346, no. 1666; Drawing after A. B. COOK, *Zeus*, II, Cambridge 1925, 443, fig. 348).

The motif is repeated twelve years later, on 31 August 161, to celebrate the birth of another pair of twins, L. Aurelius Commodus, the future emperor Commodus, and his brother T. Aurelius Fulvus Antoninus. The coin shows the children seated on a throne, crowned with stars (Fig. 3).<sup>19</sup> Another coin shows Faustina as *Felicitas* standing, surrounded by four girls, carrying the boys, the head sometimes crowned with stars (Fig. 4).<sup>20</sup> The pose of the empress imitates that of the mother of the divine twins, Leto with the small Apollo and Diana (Fig. 5).<sup>21</sup>



**Fig. 4:** A coin showing the empress Faustina as *Felicitas* (AE, sesterce. Avenches, Musée romain M 1944. Photo MRA (Fibbi-Aeppli).

<sup>19</sup> AV and AR, aureus and denarius, *RIC* III 271, nos 709-712; AE, sesterce and as; *RIC* III 346, nos 1665-1666.

<sup>20</sup> AE, sesterce and as, *RIC* III 347, nos 1673-1677; AV and AR, aureus and denarius, *RIC* III 271, nos 718-719.

<sup>21</sup> A famous statue by Euphranor depicting Leto and her children may have served as a model. It was brought to Rome in the reign of Tiberius; Plin. *nat.* 34, 77; O. PALAGIA, *Euphranor*, Leiden 1980, 36-9.



**Fig. 5:** Leto with the small Apollo and Diana (Marble statuette. Rome, Mus. Torlonia 68. Photo DAI Rome, neg. 34.2003).

Besides the Dioscouroi and Romulus and Remus, other references to mythical twins are found. Commodus was depicted as a new Heracles when he was still a child. In a marble statue he is depicted as a *Herakliskos*, strangling snakes. The statue was probably made in 166 when Commodus was aged 5.<sup>22</sup> His twin brother Antoninus had died a year before.<sup>23</sup> The allusion to Heracles is

<sup>22</sup> Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, J. H. and E. A. Payne Fund 1971.394; W. H. Gross, *Herakliskos Commodus*, Göttingen 1973.

<sup>23</sup> *H.A. Comm.* 1, 4.

meaningful as Heracles also lost his twin brother Iphicles. The reference contributed to explaining the death of Antoninus as a natural event, and dispelled any suspicion of divine anger against the imperial family. By identifying the surviving son with Heracles, the archetype of the vigorous toddler, Commodus' parents may have expressed their hope of seeing their son survive childhood.

Less well known is the fact that Commodus kept referring to the Dioscouroi after the death of his twin brother. An aureus coined in 175 depicts on the one side his portrait, on the other side a lonely Dioscouros standing beside his horse.<sup>24</sup> This iconographic metaphor exalted Marcus Aurelius: father of new Dioscouroi, the emperor was implicitly compared with Jupiter.

Is it possible to explain why were twins so welcome in Rome? One reason may have been the natalist policy of the Roman state, which was legally reinforced by Augustus and his successors.<sup>25</sup> The birth of twins was also associated with the positive connotations of the birth of divine children such as Romulus and Remus, whose miraculous rescue by a she-wolf symbolises the power of divine protection, or the pair of the Dioscouroi, Castor and Pollux, saviours, promoters of fecundity and healers. Iconography may also refer to other pairs of divine twins, such as Heracles and Iphicles.

### The status of multiple births

The simultaneous birth of three, four and more children seem to have received different treatment than those of twins. The research is difficult because the evidence is scarce, from various perspectives (medical, religious, legal), and contradictory. The rare occurrence of the phenomenon certainly influenced equivocal attitudes. If twins, in present western countries, represent about 1 birth in 80, the occurrence of triplets and of quadruplets is much lower (1 birth in 8 000 / 1 birth in 600 000).<sup>26</sup>

The Ancients, however, do report a few cases of multiple births. The fate of the children is generally not mentioned, but mortality must have been very high because of the prematurity of the newborn babies<sup>27</sup>. Feeding them must also have been a problem. Specific terms designate these children; in Greek they are based on *δίδυμος*: *τρίδυμα*, triplets, *τετράδυμα*, quadruplets, and *επτάδυμα*, septuplets.<sup>28</sup> In Latin, we find also forms composed with *gemi*: *trigeminus* ou *tergeminus*, *septemgeminus*.<sup>29</sup> The paucity of expressions may be due to the fact that *gemi* could designate not

<sup>24</sup> AV, aureus; RIC III 266, no. 648, pl. 10, 214; AE, sesterce RIC III 340, no. 1578; B. POULSEN, 'Ideologia, mito e culto dei Castori a Roma: dall'età repubblicana al tardo-antico', in L. NISTA (ed.), *Castores. L'immagine dei Dioscuri a Roma. Guida alla Mostra*, Roma 1994, 97f., fig. 7.

<sup>25</sup> On the advantages for women having three children or more (and possibly twins), see e.g. S. TREGGIARI, *Roman Marriage. Iusti Coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian*, Oxford 1991, 60-80, esp. 69; L. ARENDS OLSEN, *La femme et l'enfant dans les unions illégitimes à Rome*, Berne 1999, 159-62.

<sup>26</sup> The occurrence is calculated according to Hellin's law (for quintuplets: 1 in 41 million); J.-C. PONS – Y. LAURENT, 'Grossesses multiples d'ordre supérieur à quatre', in E. PAPIERNIK-BERKHAEUER – J.-C. PONS (eds), *Les grossesses multiples*, Paris 1991, 330-5.

<sup>27</sup> The first quintuplets known to have all survived are the Dionne sisters born in 1934 in Canada.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. Plut. *mor.* 906 B (triplets); Strabo 15, 1, 22, 695 C (quadruplets, septuplets).

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Lucr. 5, 28 (*tergeminus*).

only two children born at the same time but also many: *Gemini non sunt duo tantum simul nati, sed etiam plures*, writes Isidor of Seville in his *Etymologies*.<sup>30</sup>

Besides a few mentions of triplets and quadruplets, most anecdotes concern quintuplets, perhaps because of the paradigmatic value of the number five. According to Aristotle, five children represent the limit of human multiple parturition: 'The largest number ever brought forth is five, and such an occurrence has been witnessed on several occasions'.<sup>31</sup> However, a few examples of more numerous births have been reported. Most of them took place in Egypt, a country where women were believed to be exceptionally prolific thanks to the fertilising properties of the Nile. Strabo writes, quoting Aristotle, that in Egypt a woman bore seven children at a time, *ἑπτάδυμα*, a story also repeated by Pliny the Elder, but no author specifies if they were dead or alive, or if they survived.<sup>32</sup> In Egypt, even goats produce quintuplets, claims Aelian.<sup>33</sup> An extraordinary procreative capacity also had negative sides. The Nile was believed to cause not only multiple births but also monstrous births. As Aristotle asserts, 'the occurrence of monstrosities is more common in regions where the women are prolific, as in Egypt'.<sup>34</sup>

The peak is found in the *History of Animals*, where Aristotle mentions an extraordinary miscarriage of twelve still-born infants.<sup>35</sup> This case may be evoked in a manuscript dating from the ninth century AD, preserved in Brussels. Drawings accompany a work in Latin written for midwives by Mustio, an African physician of the sixth century AD.<sup>36</sup> The source of the pictures may be much older, as Mustio adapted the treatise on gynaecology by Soranus, dating from the second century AD, which was perhaps illustrated by similar vignettes. The series of pictures shows cases of difficult labour: there are triplets in various transverse positions, quadruplets in foot or breech presentations, and the extraordinary picture of eleven or twelve foetuses, possibly those cited by Aristotle (Fig. 6). The phenomenon of twinning could also be multiplied by exceptional fecundity. Aristotle reports that a woman 'had twenty children at four successive births; each time she had five, and most of them grew up'.<sup>37</sup> Pliny the Elder specifies that she lived in the Peloponnese. According to Soranus, she gave birth to five children three times, 'with difficulty', he adds.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Isid. *etym.* 9, 5, 21; See also Serv. *Aen.* 1, 744: 'non enim semper de duobus dicunt geminos, sed de pluribus'.

<sup>31</sup> Arist. *hist. an.* 7, 4, 584b. This statement is repeated by Gell. 10, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Strabo 15, 1, 22, 695 C; Plin. *nat.* 7, 33 (information attributed to Trogus).

<sup>33</sup> Ael. *NA* 3, 33. On the qualities attributed to the Nile water, see e.g. Plin. *nat.* 7, 33.

<sup>34</sup> Arist. *gen. an.* 4, 4, 770a 35.

<sup>35</sup> Arist. *hist. an.* 7, 4, 585a.

<sup>36</sup> Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, *Codex Bruxellensis*, 3714, ff. 27r, 28v and 29r. C. BONNET-CADILHAC, 'Les représentations du foetus in utero', *Medicina nei Secoli* 7:2 (1995) 339-50, fig. 9; *ead.*, 'Si l'enfant se trouve dans une présentation contre nature, que doit faire la sage-femme?', in DASEN, *cit.* n. 1 (2004), 199-207.

<sup>37</sup> Arist. *hist. an.* 7, 4, 584b.

<sup>38</sup> Plin. *nat.* 7, 33; Sor. *gyn.* 4, 1.



**Fig. 6:** Cases of difficult labour from a ninth century AD manuscript of Mustio (Author's drawing after the *Codex Bruxellensis*, Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, 3714).

In the official discourse, multiple births are welcomed. This favourable attitude mainly concerns triplets, who seem to represent a special case. They have heroic models, the legendary triplets, the Horatii, the champions of Rome against other legendary triplets, the champions of Alba, the Curiatii. Dionysius of Halicarnassus explains that the two sets of triplets were born of twin sisters, the daughters of the Alban Sicinius who married one to the Roman Horatius, the other to the Alban Curiatius; the sisters gave birth to triplets on the same day and the event was greeted as a good omen by both communities.<sup>39</sup> To confer 'immortal honour and glory' on the Horatii, a law 'observed to this day' (first century BC), provided that 'the parents of triplets shall receive from the public treasury the cost of rearing them till they are grown'.<sup>40</sup>

If no record of real triplets benefitting from this law is known, we find several allusions to triplets in the *Digest* of Justinian, mainly concerning the right of succession. Paulus and Gaius thus estimate that if the wife is pregnant when the husband dies, only a fourth of the succession may be attributed to the child already born, pending the exact number of future babies, invoking the case of the Horatii and Curatii to attest the birth of triplets.<sup>41</sup>

The birth of triplets is also mentioned in the case of a slave freed by a will on condition that she gives birth to three children. Tryphoninus cites the example of Arescosa: if the mother already has a child and then gives birth to triplets, which child frees his mother, and which child is born free from a freed mother? He considers that it is the last child.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Dion. Hal. *ant. Rom.* 3, 13, 3-4.

<sup>40</sup> Dion. Hal. *ant. Rom.* 3, 22, 10.

<sup>41</sup> *Dig.* 5, 4, 3 (Paul, 17 *ad Plautium*); *Dig.* 34, 5, 7(8) (Gaius, 1 *Fideicommissorum*).

<sup>42</sup> *Dig.* 1, 5, 15. (Tryphoninus, 10 *Disputationum*).

Gellius too describes the birth of quintuplets as a heroic, though tragic event. He explains that a servant of Augustus had five children who died soon after delivery. The author adds that 'a monument was erected to her by order of Augustus on the *Via Laurentina* and on it was inscribed the number of her children'.<sup>43</sup> Engaged in the promotion of a natalist policy, Augustus probably hoped that rewarding this exceptional fecundity would encourage the *matronae*.<sup>44</sup>

A second series of texts presents multiple births in a negative light. In the *Liber prodigiorum*, Julius Obsequens mentions triplets in a series of threatening phenomena which happened in the year 163 BC: 'At Terracina male triplets were born (*pueri trigemini*), at Privernum a girl was born without any hands, at Caere a pig was born with human hands and feet, and children were born with four feet and four hands'.<sup>45</sup> The author does not specify whether the triplets were alive, or physically normal, but their birth is equated with monstrous births.

In the *Historia Augusta*, the births of quintuplets appear in a similar enumeration of disquieting events, like another disruption of the natural order:

The following misfortunes and prodigies occurred in his reign. The famine [...], the collapse of the Circus, an earthquake whereby the towns of Rhodes and of Asia were destroyed [...], and a fire at Rome which consumed three hundred and forty [...] dwellings. [...] Besides, the Tiber flooded its banks, a comet was seen, as two-headed child was born, and a woman gave birth to quintuplets (*uno partu mulieris quinque pueri editi sunt*). There was seen, moreover, in Arabia a crested serpent larger than the usual size which ate itself from the tail to the middle; and also in Arabia there was a pestilence, while in Moesia barley sprouted from the top of trees.<sup>46</sup>

In a few texts, multiple births are explicitly designated as *portentum* or *ostentum*, two terms almost synonymous denoting signs of bad omens.<sup>47</sup> Describing the records of fecundity in Egypt, Pliny the elder explains: 'The birth of triplets is attested in the case of the *Horatii* and *Curatii*; above that number is considered portentous (*super [tres] inter ostenta ducitur*), except in Egypt, where drinking the water of the Nile causes fecundity'.<sup>48</sup> The term *ostentum* designates the birth of triplets as a bad omen. The frequency of the phenomenon seems to determine its reception: if the event is rare, it is a bad omen, if it is frequent, as in Egypt, it is normal.

The term *portentum* qualifies multiple births in the *Digest* of Justinian. Gaius tells us that in the reign of Hadrian a woman had quintuplets.<sup>49</sup> The Emperor asked her to come, not because she would get royal foster-parentage, or official bounty, or popular acclaim, but because the number of her children, past three, was a bad omen, *portentosum*. The story seems to have been very popular. We find it repeated with variations in the *Digest* and elsewhere. According to Phlegon of Tralles, the

<sup>43</sup> Gell. 10, 2, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. one commemorative inscription from Rome may mention triplets: '[Ti] Claudio Aug. L. Felici, actario Caesaris, verna divi Augusti ex trigemnis', H. SOLIN, 'Analecta epigraphica', *Arctos* 19 (1985) 213-214; SOLIN, *cit.* n. 4, 64, n. 192.

<sup>45</sup> Obseq. 14.

<sup>46</sup> H.A. Pius 9, 1-5.

<sup>47</sup> See C. MOUSSY, 'Esquisse de l'histoire de *monstrum*', *REL* 55 (1977) 345-69; A. ALLÉLY, 'Les enfants malformés et handicapés à Rome sous le Principat', *REA* 106 (2004) 73-102, esp. 90-93.

<sup>48</sup> Plin. *nat.* 7, 33.

<sup>49</sup> *Dig.* 34, 5, 7(8) (Gaius, 1 *Fideicommissorum*).

woman was from Alexandria. She gave birth to quintuplets, three boys and two girls, and the next year to triplets.<sup>50</sup>

No text indicates the destiny of these portentous children. They do not seem to have been regarded as frightening as the physically abnormal babies who were ritually put to death under the Republic.<sup>51</sup> No law seems to have required the killing of quadruplets or quintuplets, most likely because such laws were reserved for children with bodily defects. Their very low survival expectancy may also explain the absence of laws.

Only Pliny the Elder specifies what kind of misfortune such event could predict. In his *Natural History*, he mentions that at Ostia, at the end of the reign of Augustus, 'a certain woman of the lower orders named Fausta was delivered of two male and two female infants'.<sup>52</sup> He gives no information about the survival of the children, but says that the birth heralded a famine: it 'unquestionably portended the food shortage that followed'.

A disquieting image of multiple births is also present in the *Book of the Dreams* of Artemidorus. Two dreams associate triplets and septuplets with death. The first one is about triplets, symbolised by three images seen in the moon by the dreamer; she delivered triplets who died. Another woman dreamt of seven delivery chairs on the sea; she had septuplets who likewise died.<sup>53</sup>

### Twins and multiple births in the Hippocratic and Aristotelian discourses

How can we explain the difference of treatment between twins and other multiple births? Varro provides a key for interpreting these contrasting attitudes in his book *On Agriculture* (116-27 BC). Speaking of cattle, he mentions that 'the saying is that a sow should bear as many pigs as she has teats. If she bear less she will not pay for herself, and if she bear more it is a portent (a sow can feed eight little pigs)', '*si plures pariat, esse portentum*'.<sup>54</sup>

This observation evokes the reasoning of the Hippocratic treatises which relate the ideal number of children in man with the structure of the female uterus, divided into two pouches (*kolpoi*). In the treatise *On Regimen*, twinning appears as a natural, though infrequent, phenomenon, explained by the symmetrical structure of the female womb. Twins may be conceived through one act of intercourse if two favourable factors combine: if both parts of the womb are equally developed, and if the seed from both parents is 'abundant and strong'.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> *Mir.* 29. For variants, see e.g. *Dig.* 5, 4, 3 (Paul, 17 *ad Plautium*) (four children the same day, the fifth one 40 days later) and *Lydus mens.* 4, 89 (four children in four days, the fifth one 40 days later).

<sup>51</sup> On the treatment of newborn children with (specific) physical deformities in the Republican period, see L. BRISSON, *Le sexe incertain: androgynie et hermaphrodisme dans l'Antiquité gréco-romaine*, Paris 1997, esp. 13-39; R. GARLAND, *The Eye of the Beholder. Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World*, London 1995, esp. 67-70; V. ROSENBERGER, *Gezähmte Götter. Das Prodigienwesen der römischen Republik*, Stuttgart 1998; A. ALLÉLY, 'Les enfants malformés et considérés comme prodigia à Rome et en Italie sous la République', *REA* 105 (2003) 127-56.

<sup>52</sup> *Plin. nat.* 7, 33.

<sup>53</sup> *Artem.* 5, 12; 5, 73.

<sup>54</sup> *Varro rust.* 2, 4, 16.

<sup>55</sup> *Hippoc. acut.* 1, 30, 1 (Littre VI 504).

The two breasts correspond to the two parts of the uterus. The Hippocratic treatises offer many allusions to this correspondence. The author of the *Aphorisms* notes that: 'If the breasts regress suddenly, it means that she will have a miscarriage'. Similarly, 'If, in a woman who is carrying twins, one breast becomes thin, a miscarriage will occur of one of the children. If the right breast is affected, the male child will be lost, if the left, the female'.<sup>56</sup>

The notion of a relationship between the breast and the structure of the uterus profoundly influenced collective representations. It is repeated by non-medical authors, such as Plutarch, who praises the wisdom of Nature 'for she has fashioned women's breasts double, so that, if there be twins, they may have a double source of nutrition'.<sup>57</sup> Nature thus determined the optimal number of children. We may find traces of this discourse in the common opinion, especially in the Italic and Gallo-Roman world, as in the series of Gallo-Roman terracotta figurines depicting a mother breastfeeding two babies, symbols not only of accomplished maternity but of ideal fecundity (Fig. 7).<sup>58</sup>

The belief in the correspondence between the number of breasts and the number of children is long-lived. Stories collected by J. Gélis show that it was still present in collective imagery in 17th and 18th century Europe.<sup>59</sup> An 18th century case relates to a girl who had four breasts. Her family asked a doctor from Basel to examine her 'pour savoir si, en se mariant, elle ne s'exposait pas à faire quatre ou au moins trois enfants à la fois'.<sup>60</sup> As the doctor asserted that this was impossible, she married, and, to her family's relief, never had more than one child at a time.

The notion of correspondence between breasts and uterus explains the positive reception of twins and the distress caused by other multiple births. Whereas twins meant prosperity, multiple births were synonymous with penury. In Varro, the sow will not be able to feed her supernumerary



Fig. 7: Gallo-Roman figurine with a mother breastfeeding two babies (Terracotta. Saint-Marcel, Musée d'Argentomagus 74.7. Museum photo).

<sup>56</sup> Hippoc. *aphorisms* 5, 37 (Littré IV 544); 5, 38 (Littré IV 545).

<sup>57</sup> Plut. *mor.* 3 D. Cf. Gal. *de usu partium* 14, 4 (Kühn IV 150).

<sup>58</sup> On these figurines, V. DASEN, 'A propos de deux fragments de *Deae nutrices* à Avenches: Déesse-mères et jumeaux dans le monde italo-gallo-romain', *Bulletin de l'Association Pro Aventico* 39 (1997) 125-40.

<sup>59</sup> J. GÉLIS, *L'arbre et le fruit. La naissance dans l'Occident moderne (XVIe-XIXe siècle)*, Paris 1984, 355.

<sup>60</sup> PERCY - LAURENT, s.v. 'multimamme', in C. L. F. PANCKOUCKE (ed.), *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales*, vol. 34, Paris 1818, 526.

piglets, which will die of hunger. Excessive fecundity produces its opposite, death. By the same logic, the human quadruplets mentioned by Pliny the Elder heralded a famine. An anecdote of the Byzantine period expresses this ambivalence. Eustathius, archbishop of Thessalonica (1115–1195/96), reports that a woman from the Peloponnese gave birth to nonuplets. She threw seven away in the sea and kept two. By preserving two children, she suppressed the excess and restored the natural order.<sup>61</sup>

The positive image of twins is challenged by the Aristotelian tradition. In Aristotle, the contrast between two or more children disappears. He does not believe that the uterus is divided into two parts, and considers all types of multiple births as a kind of monstrosity, for humans normally have only one child at a time, but 'perfected by the time of birth'.<sup>62</sup> When two children are conceived, they may hamper each other and grow monstrous, as in Siamese twins.<sup>63</sup> In the Aristotelian treatises, hyperfecundity also equates women with animals. Twins may be due to superfetation, a second fecundation resulting from sexual relations in the course of pregnancy. Only animals characterized by their lascivity, such as mares or doe-hares, accept sexual relations during that period.<sup>64</sup> Worse, the mother may have had intercourse with different partners, and conceive two (or more) children with different fathers, like doe-hares.<sup>65</sup> Multiple births are thus associated with abnormal sexuality, as if a deviation in the natural order had to correspond with deviant behaviour.<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusions

Modern medical textbooks still vacillate between the Hippocratic and the Aristotelian traditions, some discussing multiple pregnancies as a happy event, some including twins and multiple births in the class of human anomalies.<sup>67</sup> In the Roman world, the Hippocratic views seem to have prevailed in collective imagination. Products of a two-pouched uterus, twins were welcomed as signs of an enviable fecundity. No legal text suspects the legitimacy of twins, nor discusses the possibility of superfetation. The topic seems to have remained in the field of medical speculation and political rumour.<sup>68</sup> Outside Hippocratic reasoning, multiple births of a higher degree appeared as anomalies

<sup>61</sup> Eustath. *Commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem*, ed. M. VAN DER VALK, III, Lugduni Batavorum 1979, 475f. Cf. M.-H. CONGOURDEAU, 'Regards sur l'enfant nouveau-né à Byzance', *REByz* 51(1993) 161-76, esp. 172.

<sup>62</sup> Arist. *gen. an.* 4, 4, 770a 33f.

<sup>63</sup> Arist. *gen. an.* 4, 4, 770b 24-7.

<sup>64</sup> On the lascivity of doe-hares, see e.g. Arist. *hist. an.* 6, 2, 579b 31-3. On mares (which cannot produce twins by superfetation because their uterus is too small), 6, 18, 571b 8-30.

<sup>65</sup> Arist. *hist. an.* 7, 4, 585a 12-16; Plin. *nat.* 7, 49; For the medical sources the phenomenon of superfetation, see C. LIENAU, 'Die Behandlung und Erwähnung von Superfetation in der Antike', *Clio medica* 6 (1971) 275-85, and for the suspicion of adultery and the animalistic nature of the twins' mother, DASEN, *cit.* n. 2, 32-5.

<sup>66</sup> In modern times (and probably also medieval times), the mother of many children was compared to an animal, usually a sow. Cf. GÉLIS, *cit.* n. 59, 371f.

<sup>67</sup> See for example, the chapter by M. C. PHELAN on twins in R. E. STEVENSON – J. G. HALL – R. M. GOODMAN, *Human Malformations and Related Anomalies*, Oxford 1993, 1047-79.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. MENCACCI, *cit.* n. 4, 12-13, for the remarkable story in *H.A. Marcus* 19, 3 and 6 about Faustina's adultery with a gladiator and the birth of Commodus.

contrary to the natural order. Triplets represent a borderline case, at times associated with excess and disorder, at times with abundance.<sup>69</sup> The existence of legendary and mythical models may partly explain their ambivalent status. Beside invincible warriors such as the Horatii, for example, we find in the astrological treatise of the Claudius Ptolemaeus triplets (three boys) who are compared with the Cabeiroi (Saturn, Jupiter, Mars), three girls with the Charites (Venus, the Moon, Mercury), two boys and one girl with the Dioscouroi and Helena (Saturn, Jupiter and Venus), two girls and a boy with Demeter, Core and Dionysos (Venus, the Moon and Mars).<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> On the symbolism of triplicity, see G. DUMÉZIL, *Horace et les Curiaces*, Paris 1952, esp. 126-34; V. DASEN, 'Des Molionides à Janus: les êtres à corps ou à parties multiples dans l'Antiquité classique', in H.-K. SCHMUTZ (ed.), *Phantastische Lebensräume, Phantome und Phantasmen in der neuzeitlichen Naturgeschichte*, Marburg an der Lahn 1997, 119-41.

<sup>70</sup> Ptol. *tetr.* 3, 7 (122). The author, however, adds that the children are often premature and may have physical deformities. Cf. the image of the Dioscouroi and Helena as triplets in Roman art; L. KAHIL – N. ICARD, 'Helene', in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, vol. 4, Zürich 1988, nos 11-13, pl. 293.

**HOPING FOR CONTINUITY**

**CHILDHOOD, EDUCATION AND DEATH  
IN ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES**

edited by

KATARIINA MUSTAKALLIO

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