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► **To cite this version:**

Arietta Papaconstantinou. Children and Family in Late Antique Egyptian Monasticism by Caroline T. Schroeder (review). *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 2023, 16, pp.249-251. 10.1353/jla.2023.0014 . hal-04422680

HAL Id: hal-04422680

<https://amu.hal.science/hal-04422680>

Submitted on 31 Jan 2024

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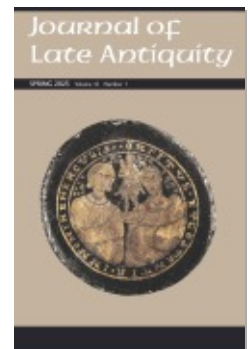
Children and Family in Late Antique Egyptian Monasticism by
Caroline T. Schroeder (review)

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Journal of Late Antiquity, Volume 16, Number 1, Spring 2023, pp.
249-251 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jla.2023.0014>



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studies that demonstrate the ambitions of the Merovingians beyond their borders as well as the influx of eastern influences on their cultural production. While the contributions to this volume do not always cleave as closely as one might like to the theme of “east and west” and several identify analogies without drawing conclusions about agents of transmission, the book demonstrates convincingly that any consideration of Merovingian political and cultural history must take into account the Mediterranean *Spielraum* that influenced and informed Frankish identity from the sixth to the early eighth centuries.

*Children and Family in Late
Antique Egyptian Monasticism*

CAROLINE T. SCHROEDER

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
2020. Pp. xiii + 255. ISBN 9781107156876

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(University of Reading)

When in 2006 Alice-Mary Talbot and I organized a conference on late antique and Byzantine childhood at Dumbarton Oaks, we felt we were venturing into new territory. In the fifteen years following that conference, the field has seen a spectacular rise in interest for all aspects of childhood in the broader late antique and Byzantine world. Caroline Schroeder’s book is one of the most sophisticated products of this surge, both in its overall approach to the subject and in its nuanced and balanced discussions. Schroeder tackles a favorite of research on medieval childhood: the uneasy relationship between children and monasteries. This has not yet been studied comprehensively for the eastern Mediterranean, and this book, focused more

specifically on late antique Egypt, makes an important first step in that direction.

After an introduction defining the concept of “child” as used in the book and discussing the broader issue of how cultural norms can affect the way we study the subject, the first section, “Finding children,” surveys a very broad array of sources, from monastic to visual to documentary (Chapter 1: “Documenting the Undocumented: Children in the Earliest Egyptian Monasteries”), and discusses the vocabulary of childhood and its ambiguities (Chapter 2: “The Language of Childhood”). Paradoxically, however, the second chapter undermines the first: the constant uncertainty regarding what exactly is being referred to by the various possible words for “child” does not support the argument that children’s presence in monasteries was common and important. Neither does it invalidate it, of course, but the interpretation of most of the texts used is far from univocal.

The second section, “Representations,” is on much firmer ground, because it discusses literary themes about children. Each of the three chapters is based on a previously published article, and despite being self-standing studies, they combine to offer an excellent analysis of the thought-world of monastic writers and the literary uses to which they put children. Chapter 3, “Homeropticism, Children, and the Making of Monks” (based on a 2009 publication, “Queer Eye for the Ascetic Guy? Homeropticism, Children, and the Making of Monks in Late Antique Egypt” in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77: 333–47), treats the vexed issue of the sexualization of young boys in male monasteries. The undeniable grim reality underlying monastic literary

obsessions about young boys is difficult to access through texts that primarily express the sexual anxieties of monks. For the monks, they probably functioned similarly to texts about eunuchs or imaginary disguised women in their midst.

Chapter 4, “Child sacrifice: from familial renunciation to Jephthah’s lost daughter” (originally from 2012, “Child Sacrifice in Egyptian Monastic Culture: From Familial Renunciation to Jephthah’s Lost Daughter” in the *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20: 269–302), brings together topics as disparate as the killing of children and the renunciation of family affection. Schroeder shows how these hang together in a web of holy hierarchies, where obedience to God—and the line of authority figures representing him—trumps any bond within the biological family. She explores the complex intertextual relations between monastic stories and biblical models and the symbolic power of a practice that went against cultural norms. Biblical models like Jephthah and Abraham undeniably underlie such stories, but sacrificing one’s child for a superior cause was also a Homeric theme and certainly familiar to monks with a Greek education.

The final chapter in this section, chapter 5: “Monastic Family Values: The Healing of Children” (rooted in a 2011 publication, “Monastic Family Values: The Healing of Children in Late Antique Egypt” in *Coptica* 10: 21–28), discusses healing in both the literal and the symbolic sense—in other words, both biological and spiritual cures. Schroeder argues that the monastery thus took on the role of the household by providing care and moral education to the children. Although the monks’ healing powers were ascribed to faith and asceticism, it seems inmates sometimes had medical expertise and

used it not only for children but also for the wider community. A “book of medicine” is even mentioned in the inventory of a monastic library near ancient Thebes in the eighth century, for which see René-Georges Coquin, “Le catalogue de la bibliothèque du couvent de Saint-Élie « du rocher » (ostracon IFAO 13315)” in *Bulletin de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale* 75 (1975): 207–39 (here page 212, line 36 of the text, translation page 218); moreover, Schroeder also mentions the presence of a medical collection at Shenoute’s monastery (page 41).

The third section attempts “A social history” of children in monasteries. Two chapters reconstructing their daily life (Chapter 6: “Making New Monks: Children’s Education, Discipline, and Ascetic Formation,” and Chapter 7: “Breaking Rules and Telling Tales: Daily Life for Monastic Children”), are followed by one discussing the emotional complexities of raising children in a monastic environment (Chapter 8: “The Ties That Bind: Emotional and Social Bonds between Parents and Children”). Schroeder discusses how children were raised in a setting that claimed to be an alternate household through the emulation of several aspects of ancient childrearing. Education and discipline, including corporal punishment, went hand in hand; children were fed and looked after but also sexually abused, and their labor was exploited. Schroeder sees the monastery as a haven of food security for children whose families had no means to feed them—although not all monasteries had the means of Shenoute’s federation, and many may well have struggled as much as the surrounding communities.

The final chapter on emotions is more wide-ranging. Its overview of work on ancient emotions is precious, and it is

successfully applied to monastic authors, more specifically Cassian, Shenoute, and Jerome. Schroeder is especially interested in the use of emotions to manipulate and control within the monastic setting, and how this was geared towards the undoing of biological bonds and their replacement with the surrogate monastic family. This is a chapter with many insights and the potential to become a book in itself. It is followed by a long conclusion entitled “Monastic Genealogies,” which expands on that final theme of the rise of a familial model within monastic discourse. Schroeder takes her cue from the work of Ville Vuolanto and Kate Cooper on the movements that disrupted traditional family ideals in Gaul and Italy, and she redeploys their ideas to the Egyptian context, especially—but not only—through the writings of Shenoute.

Now, we all have our source biases, and Schroeder’s is clearly Shenoute and, secondarily, Pachomius. My bias, on the other hand, is papyri, and like many papyrologists I tend to think that one cannot really write Egyptian social history without them. Schroeder does cite some in the early chapters but mostly to reinforce points made from other sources rather than as a core source. Yet in recent decades the number of published texts from monastic contexts, often cohesive corpora, has increased enormously. They document aspects of monastic life that are discussed here at length, and they very rarely mention children. This is a problem if we want to accept the premise of this book, namely, that children were a normal, everyday presence in monasteries.

Schroeder’s analysis opens a fascinating window into monastic understandings of childhood and fantasies about children. Their absence in documentary

evidence and the lexical difficulties in Chapter 2 may indeed undermine the claim to an everyday “reality” of monastic children, but it takes nothing away from her insightful analysis of the sources. It would only need to be framed—like Part II—as “representations.” In antiquity, the semantic field of childhood was extended to those understood as dependent and/or subordinate—a device also used as a central trope of imperialist discourse and a tool of domination even to this day. Monastic literature proceeded with an arsenal of metaphors, all making theological points through everyday examples. Illness signified spiritual decay, eroticism played with divine love in the tradition of the Song of Songs, sacrifice meant giving up—and childhood pointed to forms of subjection. In that sense, even if she does not really demonstrate the *pervasive* presence of children in monasteries (surely there were *some*), Schroeder does reveal the strong hierarchies and relations of domination that were mediated through the discourse of childhood in those secluded micro-societies.

This book will mark the field. Its thorough treatment of as yet unexplored themes in monastic literature will make it indispensable to anyone working not only on late antique monasticism but more broadly on the cultural history of Late Antiquity. Schroeder has brought to light the surprising—and, to me, unsuspected—extent of monastic interest in childhood, and the chapters of Parts I and III usefully complement and frame her previous work on the subject, which forms Part II. My misgivings above regarding children’s *actual* presence in monasteries are ultimately irrelevant to the core of Schroeder’s powerful and subtle analysis of a monastic corpus she knows and understands intimately.