

Infancy, Polygamy and Parenting within Iron Age Kent

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The primary influence upon any living infant is its immediate parental circle. Scott (1999, 125) highlights the reality that we all have commonly shared experiences of infancy. Yet recollections of these are mostly lost through age and mental development. One exception to this can be traced to a sense of social or collective memory, which shapes many cultural aspects of childrearing. Parenting must be seen to be a facet of this memory process.

Social conditioning by parental figures produces families, kinship groups, communities, societies and civilizations which archaeologists study; yet the term 'parental' has many dimensions. Comprehension of human parenting is a difficult concept to discuss in archaeological contexts because our view of it tends to be both modern and western in outlook. Broadly speaking the term 'parent' can be taken to represent the meeting of the basic social needs of infants and children; yet the outcome and manner in which this manifests itself has varied through time and space (Scott 1999, 44, 125). Furthermore, it is impossible to detect the outcome of individual parenting within the archaeological record.

One must critically evaluate the processes of parenting. The term can often be misleading to a modern western mind. For example, it may conjure up the image of the infant with his or her biological mother and father. Biological relationship alone cannot define parenting. The role and worth of extended family, wider community and substitute parents has remained poorly examined within archaeological theory. Even where consideration has been provided to biological parenting, it commonly tends to portray the father as inferior to the mother within childrearing processes.

Different Peoples, Different Cultures: Exploring Caesar's Accounts of Fatherhood within Late Iron Age Gaul and Kent

The role of fathers within the processes of pregnancy, birth and the raising of infants is one that has become lost within current gender theory. The fact that fathers played a significant part in the lives and fortunes of their children is supported by the ancient authors. Freeman (2002, 54) details how Caesar perceived Celtic fathers:

The bold Celts test their children in the jealous Rhine and no man regards himself as a true father until he sees the child washed in the holy river. For immediately when the child has come from the mother's womb and shed its tears, the father picks it up and places it on his own shield, not sympathizing, for he does not feel for the child like a true father until he sees it judged in the river's bath. And the mother, having new pains added to those of childbirth, even if she knows him to be the true father, awaits in fear what the inconsistent river will judge.

This above statement is loaded with personal bias and Roman propaganda. The Celtic mother is portrayed in two ways. She becomes the pitiful whore, who, with her honesty challenged, has to undergo the ultimate parental test. Caesar chooses his words carefully. Although infanticide was a familiar and common cultural practice for Romans (indeed the use of the river by the father has clear parallels with the Roman exposure of infants¹), the Celtic mother had to contend with ‘new pains added to those of childbirth’. The father is portrayed as cold and detached, his only concern being to test the will of the river upon the infant. The message could not be clearer: survive the watery test and be recognised, drown and not only does the infant die, but the father legitimises the ritual in securing his honour and dynasty. It would seem that even in childbirth the prospective father is primarily a warrior. The symbolism of the shield being used to carry the infant to the water is significant. This may, if true, have been a means of protecting the father from the social pollution of the infant. Yet the image of the shield also provokes one to view all Celtic fathers as aggressive. Furthermore, there is no indication of status. Are we therefore to presume that all Iron Age men living and working on the Continent had shields in the first place?

Concerns about lineage and race came to the fore in the Iron Age.
(Taylor 1996, 252)

An alternative view of Iron Age pregnancy and fatherhood can be found within Caesar’s description of his encounters with native Britons in Kent:

Wives are shared between groups of ten or twelve men, especially between brothers and between fathers and sons; but the offspring of these unions are counted as the children of the man with whom a particular woman cohabited first.
(Caesar 1982, 111)

At first glance there are stark similarities between this statement and Caesar’s account of the Celtic father. Caesar suggests that Iron Age women practiced polygamy. Interestingly, sex within the immediate family is encouraged and one might therefore question whether such an action aims to ensure a protected lineage.

Bowie (2003, 92) suggests that the terms ‘emic’ and ‘etic’, as coined by Pike (1954) best describe aspects relating to protective kinship, with the words ‘emic’ denoting a social insider, while ‘etic’ best describes the social outsider. Academics such as Fitzpatrick (1997) associate the boundary areas of Iron Age settlements as being more to do with the symbolic protection of etic ethnicity. One might therefore suggest that the British father encountered and portrayed by Caesar is doing little more than preserving the emic from any etic influence.

These cultural markers of kinship, commonsensuality, and religious cult are, from the point of view of the analyst, a *single recursive metaphor*. This metaphor of blood, substance, and deity symbolise the existence of the group while at the same time they constitute the group. If these boundary mechanisms were breached with regularity, the group as a differentiated entity would also cease to exist. And, indeed, history is littered with group names for which there are no contemporary groups, or even claimants to affiliation to

vanished entities. Both the durability and the ephemerality of ethnic groups are cultural and social enigmas of the first magnitude.
(Nash 1996, 25)

The notion of kinship and kin continuation, as described within the above passage by Nash, is further reinforced by the fact that any infant born to the polygynous mother belongs to her first cohabiting male. This is highly significant as it shows a direct bond between the infant and 'socially accredited' father, which in turn bolsters the emic continuity of kinship.

There is no hint of trial by death within Caesar's account of native Kentish fatherhood and therefore, should this practice be accurately recorded, it might be argued that one is in fact encountering a distinctively different means of paternity testing to that found in Gaul. In the case of the British infant, one thing is clear: it was a valued individual, so valued in fact that it warranted a commonly recognised system of accreditation. As such the infant could be seen to hold a special status that associated it to the continued lineage and prosperity of its father.

Little attention has been drawn to the fact that women seldom go through pregnancy and childbirth alone and as such the main question facing current archaeology concerns the role of the father in past societies (Scott 1999, 46). Crawford (1999, 117) suggests that in Anglo-Saxon England the father was very much involved in the raising of his children and that there is no evidence at all to support the view that fathers were socially expected or encouraged to distance themselves from such processes. This point clearly contradicts Romanist perceptions of fatherhood. Past accounts of infanticide, as suggested by the ancient authors, portray the Roman father as both distant and emotionally detached from their infant kin. Many, such as Scott (1999) use the fact that newborns were not named until eight days for a female, and nine for a male, to bolster claims of low infant status within Roman culture. Yet such accounts fail to recognise that Roman fathers (or substitutes) would normally carry out a ritualistic act immediately following the births of their infant young so as to welcome them into the family (Corbier 2001, 53). Such examples demonstrate that past perceptions of status and family are far from simple. Indeed, the above descriptions of Celtic fatherhood by Caesar pay no attention to the possibilities of a loving and trusting father as portrayed by Crawford.

Archaeology has conceptualised the role of fathers as being one-dimensional. There is a desperate need for a fuller study of fatherhood in prehistory. The fact that humankind has continued to exist and multiply legitimises the need for detailed 'father' based investigation.

Considering the Possible Role of Extended Family and the Community Group within the Childrearing Process

If we take all of the infant's primary and secondary needs in turn, we can postulate that a system of help and the subsequent building up of social favours would have benefited the infant, the biological mother and group cohesiveness.

(Scott 1999, 40)

Scott (1999, 46) suggests that the employment of wet nurses, other adults or children within a group to cover basic needs may well have been a communal reality within past cultural periods. This point is very difficult to establish from archaeology alone, for as McHugh (1999, 1) and Hodder (1984, 53) suggest, when individuals act socially they do so within a framework of meaning, and this framework is both relative and historically constructed.

From an archaeological perspective Scott (1999, 2) suggests that examining the relationship between the infant and its family is far more productive than in considering other social processes and categories. In defining the family, one must surely recognise extended kin and their wider communities as key social factors in themselves.

The Possibilities of Iron Age Fostering

The possibility that infants were 'fostered out' during the Iron Age has rarely received consideration. Fostering is a common part of Irish 'Celtic' mythology. Green (1997) describes how Irish gods, such as Midir and Manannan Mac Lir acted as foster fathers to other gods (while they were children) such as Eogabail and Lugh Lamhfada of the Long Arm (otherwise known as Lug).

Ancient authors such as Caesarⁱⁱ, further describe how the children of leading Continental 'Celts' were often sent abroad to Britain, in order to receive schooling by means of druidic apprenticeship. However, Chadwick (1997, 15-16) has recently challenged the legitimacy of Caesar's accounts of Druidism.

From an archaeological perspective, the fact that only certain and possibly selective sites boast infant inhumations may suggest the adoption of a centralised place of birthing and early infant upbringing. If so, then aspects regarding the economy of social favours as opposed to limited perceptions of agriculture and industry may have some significance. Certainly, the employment of other mothers and women as midwives is reflected within the ethnographic record; for instance Sonne (1997, 176) describes how Eskimo women often used the services of extended family in the delivery and naming of their babies.

Issues concerning rites of passage, of which childbirth is a part, are never simple. Indeed Van Gennep (1977) has demonstrated that such rites are nearly always loaded with symbolism and formalised ritual. Clearly, matters such as fostering

require a great deal of further research before any firm assumptions can be allocated to Iron Age infancy. However the possibilities nevertheless remain.

Crawford (1999, 121) records the commonality of foster care / families in Anglo-Saxon England:

Although the nuclear family was the 'typical' family, not all children could hope to be reared by both their natural parents, and other forms of family experience, including step-families and fosterage, had a place within Anglo-Saxon society.

Crawford (1999, 122-3) suggests that within this period there were three main forms of fostering: the bringing in or employment of a wet nurse or nanny; the fostering of infants or children to immediate relatives or community members; the committal of the child to a distant family / persons for longer term care and life schooling.

Such practices might well be entwined with socio-political motives or discord, family distress, or as in the third instance, with issues of prestige, nobility and honour. In any case Crawford suggests that it would be unusual to foster ones child out to persons of lesser social standing and status.

Fosterage can also be seen, in some instances, as a means of reinforcing kinship unity and bonds. Crawford (1999, 129) highlights this as being a common cultural practice within post Roman Germanic culture.

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ⁱ As described in Lally (2002).

ⁱⁱ See: Gallic Wars VI, 13.