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Archetypal Dimensions of Infant Death, Infanticide and Child Abandonment in Pre-transitional Societies

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Abstract

The present study analyses infant death, infanticide, and child abandonment in pre-transitional societies assuming that, even in various times, cultures, and geographical places, some elements are shared and commonly present on the way to decide on newborns' right to life or death in a demographic system typified by high infant mortality rates. The attention focuses on this subject with multidisciplinary sources linking newborns' mortality with population control behaviour, investigating, and clustering common elements. The aim is to revisit these topics considering them as archetypal dimensions that possess elements deeply rooted and emotionally linked in human nature to make them universally shared in time and space. This creates a network of semantic and iconic connections so strong as to persist over the centuries.

Keywords: infant death, infanticide, childcare, population history, population studies.

Infant death in pre-transitional societies

In pre-industrial societies, on average, about 34% of children did not reach the first year of age and over 50% did not go beyond 5 years for precarious living conditions and the widespread diffusion of infections and diseases (Volk and Atkinson 2013). However, infant mortality, within the 'ancient demographic system'¹ plays a primary role in determining life ex-

1. By ancient demographic system, or Malthusian demographic system, we mean the way in which demographic behaviours combine and interact with each other, determining population evolution from the Neolithic transition to the industrial revolution (Livi Bacci 2000).

pectancy at birth and in regulating fertility when there were no effective birth control systems. Nevertheless, some authors suggest that infant death within the first year of life could not be exclusively caused by exogenous factors but also, in some cases, by the voluntary elimination of newborns (Hewlett 1991; Reher 1999). This could be done by the parents to balance family resources with the number of children, and to manage the quality of the progeny answering to economic or socio-cultural reasons. Infant elimination could be also at the behest of those in power to contain population growth, remove imperfect children, and punish or take revenge from enemies in wartime (Engels 1980; Golden 1981; Lynch 2003). However, the fragility of newborns' lives and the ease with which death used to seize them, often for no apparent reason, has always fuelled a very strong emotional tension in the human population. It is possible to decode traits of symbolic homogeneity in the way human societies approach infants' death that decline in both positive and negative connotations. These common elements express themselves, for example, in the way bodies are treated and buried, in the mechanisms for overcoming pain, in consolatory literature and epigraphic evidence, in myths associated with fear of infants' death, and in apotropaic rites (Bourbou 2014; Dolansky 2019; Lambrugio 2005; Struffolino 2017).

We can hypothesize from the literary records that the women of the pre-transitional populations could know systems or substances capable of ending a secret pregnancy by abortion before it came to an end (Marececk 2019; Riddle 1992). However, after birth, a new horizon of possibilities opens for the newborn which may be favourable or unfortunate for the

baby, depending on many elements but most of all by human decisions.

The present study aims to analyse infant death after childbirth in pre-transitional societies assuming that, even in different times, cultures, and geographical places, there are elements, shared and commonly present, on the way of considering the newborn and deciding whether the baby has the right to be fed, cared for, loved, and mourned in case of death, or to be ignored, abandoned, killed after birth.

Infants go sadly through the gloom

According to scholars² for a range of societies covering a very long timeline and a very wide geographical space, the high infant mortality seems to constitute a historical constant (Morris 1978). Data collected by Volk and Atkinson, which include pre-Columbian America, ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, medieval Japan, and Renaissance Europe, show that infant mortality constantly remains between 240‰ and 340‰ for all the populations observed, albeit with large fluctuations, from 400 B.C. until after 1650 A.D. It is believed that these variations can be determined by biological factors, connected to the living conditions of the population and the lack of effective therapeutic tools against diseases, but also by cultural-historical, geographical, and environmental backgrounds (Volk & Atkinson 2013).

2. The literature on infant death dimensions in the past is extensive. We refer merely to Alesan, Malgosa & Simó 1999; Bengtsson 2009; Carr-Saunders 1922; Charbonneau 1970; Dasen 2015; Golden 1990; Knodel & Hermalin 1984; Kryzywicki 1934; Lancy 2014b; Mustakallio & Laes 2011; Nagaoka, Hirata, Yokota & Matsu'ura 2006; Parkin 2013; Rawson 2003; Storey 1985; Woods 2006, 2007.

Scholars summarize the main determinants of infant and newborn death in pre-transitional societies in a few sets of factors. The first is linked to the congenital or genetic characteristics of the foetus and health conditions at birth, including the health conditions of the mother and her survival after childbirth (Pozzi & Farinas 2015). The second set of factors is linked to the environment in which they are born and spend their first days of life, which can emphasize the diffusion of diseases or infections, especially in historical contexts in which there was no knowledge of how to fight them (Breschi, De Rosas & Oris 2009; Vélková, Hladíková & Daňová 2020). The survival of small children also depends on how they are weaned, how cared for, and attended to, and on the parent's ability to take care of them (Angel 1972; Chamberlain 2000). The last set of factors for the survival of newborns is related to the cultural and economic system, the family, and the social group surrounding them. A child being born does not mean automatically acquiring the right to survive which is determined by the social or historical contexts (Lancy 2014a; Levittan 2012).

However, the quantitative analysis of pre-statistical sources relating to the population is not simple, when considering the mortality of the newborn. Information on the death of babies is more difficult to decode than that of older children and adults and is often anonymous and underestimated. The evaluation of infant death in the past from archaeological contexts is influenced also by the fragile nature of immature remains, burial conditions, excavation techniques, and funerary practices reserved for newborns (Bourbou 2014).

Archetypal dimensions of infant death

Throughout history, the death of infants emerges as a multi-faceted phenomenon, where on the one hand there is a real unequal struggle against diseases, infections, malnutrition, accidents, and incomprehensible fatalities, but on the other also involves violence-laden behaviours and horrific indifference to helpless creatures. The passive and active manifestations of how newborns are considered, which are produced and reproduced by modifying and evolving through time and space over the centuries, have generated a set of well-structural and self-replicating patterns of behaviours. In the pre-transitional societies, this has created some transcultural archetypal dimensions within which the relationships between adults and newborns are organized, so much strong as to persist for a long time and permeate every cultural substratum of many human groups even very distant from each other geographically (Hogenson 2009).

Control, punishment, and planning

Even if estimates of infant death until the start of the modern demographic transition give a picture in which more than a quarter of newborns did not go beyond the first year of life, however, scholars have highlighted rich historical and narrative documentation demonstrating how the elimination of offspring has been widespread in all human cultures as both a quantitative and qualitative population control strategy (Caldwell & Caldwell 2003). Newborn babies sometimes were directly eliminated just after childbirth. A common way of killing infants was exposition or abandonment outdoors, far from the village, to die of starvation and bad weather or to be

eaten by animals. But they could be strangled, suffocated, buried alive, drowned in rivers, beaten, poisoned, or neglected till death (Hanlon 2016; Scrimshaw 1978).

The deliberate killing of offspring is a widespread phenomenon in many living species including mammals, but what characterizes the human species is the selective elimination of only certain types of descendants based on specific criteria that vary depending on social, cultural, or economic values. Furthermore, this behaviour, although long-standing over a long time and in a vast geographical latitude, takes on different meanings and roles in philosophical, religious, and social systems of any human society since ancient times. An action as terrible as killing a defenceless newborn baby needs a way to justify it but also represents the perfect paradox of cruelty when this justification is found in a divine voice, a philosophical theory, or the pursuit of economic well-being (Laughlin 1987).

Many studies based on archaeological evidence from Palaeolithic burial sites appear to support the thesis that, in pre-transitional societies, population growth was systematically regulated by abstinence, extended years of breastfeeding, but also by inducted abortion, and infanticide. This system of population control seems to have been quite universal and developed as a cultural adaptive answer to increasing a family's survival chances, ensuring birth spacing, adjusting population dimension to environmental and economic resources, and also maintaining the prestige of the social group (Birsdell 1987; Carr-Saunders 1922; Dickerman 1975; Divale 1972; Harris 1980).

The first written evidence, in which infant death is inlaid into a real demographic perspective and concerning the quantita-

tive dimension of the population, it can be found in the *Atra-ḫašīs*,³ a poem of the Sumero-Babylonian tradition dating back to the classical period of Mesopotamian literary culture (Pettinato 2005). This work introduces the first explicit concept that infant death was a needful tool for birth control entrusted to the work of the demon Pāšittu, the ‘child exterminator’, who has the despicable characteristic of killing infants in the first days of life (Lambert & Millard 1969; Valk 2016; Wiggermann 2000). In this poem, there is only a fine line that separates divine punishment and demographic control and in both cases, infant death is used as a divinely approved tool and the painful tragedy of a newborn’s death somehow assumes a sacrificial meaning (Dalley 2000; Heffron 2014; Kilmer 1972).

The death of infants both as divine punishment and as an instrument of demographic control, returns in the *Bible*,⁴ in Hebrews’ Books of *Tanakh*, *Talmud*, and the *Asatir*.⁵ Newborn’s elimination by the will of God or by the hand of men is a political tool, a punitive practice, a symbol of a victory without the possibility of redemption for defeated lineage or simply the frantic search to avoid the fulfilment of a prophecy (Gaster 1927; Janzen et al. 2021; Morschauer, Journal and Winter 2008; Anderson 2015; Nakhay 2008; Williamson 2020).

3. Cf. *Atra-ḫašīs*, Tablet III, Column VII, Lines 1-8 (Lambert & Millard 1969).

4. Cf. The new American Bible, *Exodus* 1, vv. 7; 22; *Isaiah* 13, vv. 16-18; *Hosea* 14, v. 1, *Lamentations* 2, vv. 11-12; *Samuel II*, 12, vv. 16-18; *Kings II*, 25, v. 7; *Jeremiah*, 31, v. 15; *Jeremiah*, 52, v. 10; *Gospels of Matthew*, 2, v. 16 (CEI 2020) (Lo Sardo 2020).

5. Cf. *Asatir Translations*, Chapter VIII, 18-20, pp. 243-244 (Gaster 1927).

As remembers Plutarch,⁶ in Sparta the elimination of the newborn was decided by the elders to control population growth, for purely economic or hereditary purposes, to allow manipulation of the sex ratio discarding unwanted females, to eliminate illegitimate offspring, and to remove deemed weak or sick children (Eyben 1980; Hirte 2001; Pepe 2020). Both Plato⁷ and Aristotle⁸ recognize the criticality of the neonatal condition by recalling that many children die within the first days of life, but at the same time, affirm the need for a selection among the newborns by eliminating the infants of the worst citizens to maintain the best possible quality of the society and underlining how the need to keep the dimensions and characteristics of the population constant and optimal must be a priority for the state (Guarracino 2016; Loddo 2013; Moseley 1986; Overbeek 1974; Panegyres 2021).

Hesiod⁹ also emphasizes how families should put wealth before the number of children by advising the father to have only one son, preferably a male one because daughters were considered only a useless burden for life. A very clear concept also for a common Greek man like Hilarion¹⁰ who doesn't want a female baby and for the poet Posidippus, who remembers that "A son is always raised, even if one is poor; a daughter is exposed, even is rich".¹¹ After all, the custom of abandoning un-

6. Cf. Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 16. 1-2, (Plutarch 1914).

7. Cf. Plato, *The Republic*, V.459e (Plato 2013); *Laws*, VI.784-785, (Plato 1926).

8. Cf. Aristotle, *History of Animals*, IX.588a10, (Aristotle 1999); Aristotle, *Politics*, II.1265b7, VII.1335b10 (Aristotle 1932).

9. Cf. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 375 (Hesiod 2018).

10. Cf. Select Papyri, *From Hilarion to Alis*, Letters, n. 105, P.Oxy744. (AA. VV. 1932)

11. Cf. English translation by E. Eyben of the Greek original Posidippus'

wanted children, the result of sexual violence, or simply female ones, seems to have been very common in the everyday life of Greek society, so much so that it has been widely taken up within mythological history¹² and theatre.¹³ These stories offer us the vision of a world in which the survival of a newborn was so ephemeral as to be subordinated to the desires and needs of adults almost as if to become a bargaining chip (Haentjens 2000; Redford 1967).

Among the Romans, while there was some disapproval against infanticide, getting rid of unwanted children was the father's prerogative by his right of *pater familias*, already recognized in the text of the *Laws of the Twelve Tables*¹⁴ which date back to 451-450 B.C. The father was not legally required to keep all the children born to him but only to produce heirs and to increase family respect and privilege (Boswell 1988). Dionysius of Halicarnassus¹⁵ reports how already in the Rome of the founders the exposure of illegitimate infants, newborns considered imperfect, or females was quite natural. Seneca¹⁶ himself affirms how sometimes the death of a physically weak infant or a daughter can be a necessary and reasonable choice

ΕΡΜΑΦΡΟΑΙΤΟΣ, Fr.11, in Kock, *Poetarum Comitorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, p. 338 (Eyben 1980; Kock 1880).

12. Cf. Herodotus, *Histories*, I, 108, (Herodotus 2013); Apollodorus, *The Library*, III.V.7 (Apollodorus 1921a) and Apollodorus, *The Library*, III. XII.5 (Apollodorus 1921b);

13. Cf. Euripides, *Ion*, 10-15, 500-505 (Euripides 1999); Menander, *Epitrepontes*, 260-265 (Menander 1979); Menander, *Perikeiromene*, 121 (Menander 1997).

14. Cf. Lucilius, *The Twelve Tables*, p. 441 (Lucilius 1938).

15. Cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, II.15.2 (Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1937).

16. Cf. Seneca, *De Ira*, 15.2 (Seneca 1928).

for the family economy and quite an act of mercy as both Terentius¹⁷ and Ovid¹⁸ recall (Harris 1994; Obladen 2016a).

With the spread of Christianity in all Western medieval societies, infanticide was progressively censored and considered the most heinous of all crimes because deprived the neonate of baptism and the soul's salvation (Obladen 2016b). However, the hard position in which the new Christian doctrine¹⁹ immediately takes on this issue suggests that the custom of abandoning infants was widely spread still in the second century B.C. Infanticide was formally declared outlawed by the emperor Valentinian in 374 CE, while the ban on the exposure and infanticide of infants, evidently still widely used by the population of the Empire, was later reconfirmed both by the *Code of Theodosius II* of 439 B.C. both from the *Code of Justinian* in 528 B.C. (Bacewicz and Friedman 2020).

Infanticide and abandonment of unwanted infants never disappeared and persisted almost unpunished throughout the medieval period especially during famine or in cases in which the newborn was the result of a bond outside the marriage (Klapish 1973). Considering that infant mortality remained constantly above 200‰ until the turn of the 1900s, getting rid of a newborn was almost simple, by declaring death at birth or by using rudimentary methods such as overlaying, prolonged neglect, domestic accidents or providing infants with inadequate food supply (Heywood 2013; Hanlon 2016). In Europe, over the years, infanticide was progressively replaced by abandonment in orphanages, and religious structures or by entrust-

17. Cf. Terentius, *Heautontimorumenos* IV.1 (Terentius 1874).

18. Cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IX.675-679 (Ovid 1916).

19. Cf. Iustinus Martyr, *The First Apology*, XXVII, XXIX (Iustinus Martyr 2007).

ing them to paid wet nurses with results, in 90% of cases fatal, that it looks like deferred infanticide, due to poor hygienic conditions and scarce resources available to keepers (Moseley 1986; Scrimshaw 1978).

Unlike what happened in Greece and the Roman Empire in the Middle East and Asia the fate of the newborn was encased in the intimacy of the female quarters and, in the secret of the house (Caldwell & Caldwell 2005).

In the pre-Islamic Middle East, the elimination of infants (*awlād*) as a tool for demographic control through infanticide or other less explicit methods of hidden infanticide was widely spread for both sexes, especially in periods of extreme poverty and heavy economic pressure and interpreted as a kind of mercy towards creatures with no hope of survival. With the advent of Islam, however, the condemnation of abortion and infanticide are both immediately considered serious crimes. Both in the *Qur'an*, and in the *Fiqh* collections, in the *ahādīth*, and the religious writings until the 16th century A.D. where numerous *fatāwā* connected to episodes of infanticide are collected (Gil'adi 1992; Masoud 2009; Musallam 1983).

In China, infanticide is featured in records referring as far as back the Zhou dynasty (c. 1050-256 B.C.E.) and used as a real planning tool predominantly reserved for baby girls, when the family exceeded the ideal size of two sons and a daughter. In the III century B.C., the philosopher Han Fei Tsū²⁰ considers the birth of a daughter a disgrace for the family and justifies her elimination by economic reasons that seem Malthusian *ante litteram*: contain population growth below the limit of

20. Cf. Han Feng Tsu, *The Complete Works*, 18.XLVI, p. 239, 19.XLIX, p. 276 (Han Fei Tsū 1959).

available resources, maintain peace and avoid famine and hunger. During the Yuan Dynasty laws prohibited infanticide, but Chinese people continued to kill baby girls for centuries during Ming and Qing periods. Infanticide in China is mentioned also many years after, in Matteo Ricci's diaries²¹ published in 1615 as a widespread practice among poor people and perceived by the population as almost an act of piety to avoid a life of violence, pain, and slavery for their children. It was only in the last years of the 17th century, during the Kangxi Dynasty, that the Chinese empire tried to put an end to the custom of drowning baby girls and anyone who disobeyed this was to be punished according to the law. However, the sex ratio in China continued to remain largely skewed towards males in many provinces, as evidenced by 19th-century missionary reports (Lee 1981).

Even if in Japanese culture inheritance and social rules for the continuation of properties, associated with ancestors' rites, were more flexible than in China, infanticide was largely diffused and considered a 'direct action'²² to determine the time spacing of births, sex sequence, and the final size of families, especially in those in periods when population growth was too fast to be controlled in other ways. As justification it was held that children under seven were not totally human and had no soul that could enter hell or experience salvation so they could be send back if they were born unwanted. Infact, killing a newborn just after delivering was not considered a crime but quite an act of humanity for poor parents that wanted to offer a minimum of prosperity to their family, because the infant

21. Cf. Ricci 1942: 86.

22. Cf. Taeuber 1958: 270.

was not considered a human being until the spirit of an ancestor entered him through his first cry. Like what happened in Europe, unwanted children were usually smothered, drowned, or crushed just after delivering. They would not receive a proper funeral but they were generally buried near homes, under house floors, or the corpse cast into a river, in the belief that they could rapidly return to the world of the unborn and be given a second chance for a new birth (Geoffrey 2016; Drixler 2013; Smith 1988). The first against infanticide and *sutego*, literally “thrown children”, was introduced by Tsunayoshi, the 5th Tokugawa Shogun around 1680, with his Laws of Compassion with the aim of ensuring that all children should be properly cared for (Bodart-Bailey 2006). However, during all the Edo period (1600-1868) the laws against infanticide were largely disregarded or applied with minimal penalties because in a culture in which infanticide was a widespread practice it was considered an active tool for achieving the well-being of the family (Drixler 2013, 2016).

The first legislation prescribing infanticide in India is reported to be enacted in the state of ancient Bengal in 1795, a territory that today includes most of the current states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh subsequently the ban spread throughout the subcontinent leading to the approval of the *Female Infanticide Act* of 1870 (Bhatnagan 2012; Gray 2021). These legislative interventions, which demonstrate the need to stem a large widespread phenomenon, are neither the beginning nor the end point for India of a very long tradition of use of infanticide, abuse, or abandonment of children to change the size of the family, to decide the sex of the children. The use of infanticide was very deeply rooted in Indian society and practised in all

social classes exclusively to eliminate unwanted baby girls starting from the late Vedic period (1000-600 A.C.) and persisting without interruption even in the modern era (Caldwell & Caldwell 2005). In Ancient Vedic such as *Atharveda Hymns*,²³ there is a clear sexual preference for male children, but there is no philosophical or religious support to justify such a strong and systematic sexual selection at birth. However, with the introduction of the caste division, male polygamy, child marriage, the dowry system and the rites of *Sati*, discrimination against daughters became progressively very strong and reached the zenith in the Medieval ages. The social and economic drive for the preservation of the family reputation by having a male son was so preponderant as to generate cultural behaviour against baby girls that could easily be eliminated without creating suspicion because the high infant mortality justified the numerous deaths (Afrin 2021; Kapur 2018; Singh 2010).

The literature on infant death in pre-transitional society is vast, and we report just a few examples of the many different sources showing the relationship between adults and infants in their first day of life. However, infant death has been used extensively as a tool for qualitative and quantitative population control, and how there are many similar elements shared by many societies in different geographic locations and eras in the way this control has been accomplished. The natural characteristics of newborn children and their unconscious way of relating to the world, devoid of any defensive barrier, can create a network of semantic and iconic connections so strong as to make them universally shared in time and space because they are deeply and emotionally rooted in human nature itself.

23. Cf. *Hymns of the Atharva Veda*, 6.XVII.1 and 14.II (Griffith 2009).

An infant is not a person

In pre-transitional societies, infants were considered expendable for population control through divine or human action, or they could become an instrument for revenge or political power. This is closely linked to the fact that ancient historical traditions and philosophical theories considered a newborn as an incomplete, imperfect being that fell into the category of 'non-yet-person.' Just after birth, an infant lived in a stage of physical, psychic, and spiritual incompleteness, and it was not yet considered a fully developed human being, until a certain period was passed beyond which, through a series of pre-established rites, he was welcomed into the family and society.

The first days following birth were always considered a critical moment during which the baby, who struggles to successfully overcome the risk of dying, was carefully observed, and evaluated, often with fear, for his permanent bond with the world of the 'non-living.' The entire medical tradition from Hippocrates to Soranus²⁴ onwards supports the importance of examining and evaluating the 'qualities' of the new-born, to recognize which ones were worth rearing or being eliminated by exposure even before cleansing²⁵ or during the ablutions themselves, by varying the type, the temperature of the liquid, or drowned in the washing bucket²⁶ (Mungello 2008; Sachdev 2010).

In the archetypal system of infant death in pre-transitional societies, the consideration of infants as a 'not-yet person' or, as

24. Cf. Soranus, *Soranus' Gynecology, How to recognize the Newborn that it's Worth Rearing*, II.6.9-10 (Soranus 1956).

25. Cf. The American Bible, *Ezekiel*, 16, vv. 4-6 (CEI 2020).

26. Cf. Soranus of Ephesus, *Gynecology*, II.VIII.12 (Soranus 1956).

suggests Plutarch, “more like a plant than an animal”,²⁷ led to delay the recognition of their social identity and has a precise function. It guarantees a sort of psychological distance between babies and adults, allowing them to build an emotional barrier to cope with offspring’s possible death, and ensures a cognitive justification for atrocious actions. Furthermore, the recognition of their state of imperfection corroborated the conception that the bond of newborns with the world of the dead had not yet been completely interrupted and represented the keystone in assigning to the baby the possibility of a future rebirth into a better life. The fact that a lot of infants died in the very first days of life easily justified the conception of intrinsic fragility of newborns, characterized by a soft body, unresponsive to stimuli, capable only of emitting inarticulate sounds, sometimes annoying, meaningless, deaf, dumb, unable to dream, without control of their bodies quite more like animals than humans²⁸ (Dasen 2010; Lancy 2014a; Moseley 1986; Syrogianni 2020).

Also, Hippocrates²⁹ and Galen³⁰ underline the physical fragility of newborns in their first forty days of life by comparing their bone structure to soft and malleable wax. Even harder appears the judgment of Pliny the Elder who describes the newborn as helpless, expressionless, incapable of anything but crying and at the mercy of every kind of disease from the first moment.

27. Cf. Plutarch, *Moralia. Roman Questions*, 288c (Plutarch 1936).

28. Cf. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, II.774a.32, V.779a.29, V.778b.80 (Aristotle 1942), *History of Animals*, IV537b.15 (Aristotle 1970), *History of Animals*, IX.587b.7-15 (Aristotle 1991), *On Colours*, 797b.24 (Aristotle 1936).

29. Cf. Hippocrates, *Eight Month’s Child*, 450 (Hippocrates 2010).

30. Cf. Galen, *On temperaments*, II.578K (Galen 2020).

The archaeological evidence reflects a strong archetypal dimension connected to infant mortality in pre-transitional societies. The suspension's concept of infants between the world of the living and that of the dead is shown in the treatment of their bodies that are different from that reserved for adults. In Roman times, for example, cremation was forbidden to children whose first tooth had not yet erupted, as Pliny recalls.³¹ It is not unusual that in the Neolithic period, in the Bronze Age up to the 6th and 3rd centuries BC in Europe and Mesopotamia, and also in many other places of the world, infants are almost absent in many necropolises or they are concentrated in areas reserved for them, sometimes even very distant from those of adults while numerous findings are under the floors or in the foundations or *intra muros* graves, inside *enchytrismo* or *pitthoi*, ceramic vases or baskets (Dasen 2013; De Lucia 2010; Nakhay 2008; Vélková, Hladíková & Danová 2020). These burial arrangements reflect a physical-symbolic dimension that reproduces their immature being, not yet part of human society and therefore destined for that place between two worlds that belongs to everything that is not yet human. However, some scholars have suggested that burial inside ceramic vases inside the home could represent an attempt not to break the mother-child bond through the reproduction of the mother's womb in the vase, in the secret hope that the dead infant could one day be reborn (Bourbou 2014; Lambrugo 2018; Liston, Rottroff & Synder 2018; McGeorge 2013). Babies, not yet human, floating between two worlds, buried in vases that compress them in foetal positions that recall the shape of the mother's uterus, as if to bring them back to their

31. Cf. Pliny, *Natural History*, VII.72 (Pliny 1942).

pre-birth condition, buried away from adult sites, even inside the house, often killed, has led to thinking them not only as souls awaiting a new birth but also as restless creatures, possessed while alive by the demons that caused their death, such as suggests Tertullianus,³² a further justification for deciding their fate without hesitation (Lancy 2014a; Lugli 2008).

Conclusions

The story of babies after childbirth in pre-transitional societies is a story of fear, pain, and struggle against death. Since ancient times, newborns have faced serious survival difficulties in every geographical area and all cultures, and even today in many countries of the world, the first year of life is risky and often fatal for many children. The newborn was conceived as a biological object, a natural element under the laws of growth and decay, still estranged from the family and not being worthy of receiving a name and social recognition if not after a reasonable number of days, therefore, insignificant from a political, economic, and statistical point of view. The frailty of newborns was considered not only as 'natural' or consequent to the 'divine will' and therefore substantially inevitable, but it also strengthened the consensus in considering it as a useful tool by God and by men both for punitive and control purposes.

The extent of this phenomenon is not only impossible to assess with certainty within the high infant mortality in antiquity and up to the beginning of the modern demographic transition. The death of infants under the age of one was a frequent event and consequently considered natural, given the hygienic, sanitary, and epidemiological conditions of the

32. Cf. Tertullianus, *A treatise on the soul*, 57, (Tertullianus 2004).

time. Thus, getting rid of an unwanted newborn, for whatever reason, was extremely simple, quick, and rarely pursued. Confused by the number of children which died of natural causes, the horrendous gravity, as it appears to us today, of infanticide or abandonment, was connected to a philosophical system of justification and comforting constructs that mitigated it, even if not erasing completely the homicidal meaning. However today, as in the past, a process of conception, gestation, and birth, followed by the death of the newborn or very small child, has always represented something incomprehensible, a subversion of the natural chronological order of events, a waste of vital energy which it is consumed in the circle of the dearest loved ones, frustrating the time spent waiting and in contempt for the fatigue of childbirth. This dual perspective is both antithetical and coexistent. How they are expressed, handed down, communicated, or perceived within an organized human group has created a complex archetypal system facing the first days of life of an infant. These archetypes and how they are expressed, handed down, communicated, or perceived within an organized human group determine at the same time the common paths and the points of discrepancy specific to each group. The first archetypal dimension is that of control, which manifests itself in the exercise of the power of life and death over newborns. This power is consciously exercised and aimed at purposes ranging from quantitative/qualitative control of the population to revenge against enemies in war, to punishment for treason or behaviour not in keeping with the laws of the social group, up to the elimination of unwanted or weak children, daughters or one of the twins to contain the costs of the family budget. This archetype of infant death linked to

control is characterized by strong, apparently inhuman, physical, and psychological violence. It has also very ancient roots over time and persists over the centuries, presenting itself in explicit or implicit forms in contexts geographically and temporally very distant from each other. Evidence of the practice of infanticide and abandonment is widely distributed historically and geographically on every continent and in societies with very different levels of complexity, from hunter-gatherers to the most evolved civilizations and even temporally much closer to the contemporary (Bechtold & Graves 2010).

The second archetypal dimension observed is based on the consideration of the child as a 'nonperson' and traces, through multiple ritual typologies, the social boundary beyond which the newborn becomes part of the social group, worthy of protection, affection, care, and a name. The consideration of the newborn as an imperfect being, not fully human, suspended between two worlds, waiting to receive his role within the social group is fundamental since the social border between a person and non-person remains a line for centuries of precise demarcation that determines the right to survival of newborns. It is the justification for massacres, infanticide, and abandonment of unwanted children. It is a feeble consolation that the death of a creature considered unfinished is not a sin and that it could return to life again or in other forms. Once crossed, it is the border that triggers the deepest fears and pains in loving parents and allows them to pass from objects to subjects (De Mause 2006; Lancy 2014a; Williamson 1978).

The archetypal vision of infant death in this study has a purely heuristic meaning to identify the cultural, social, and psychological elements that characterize the first days of infants' lives.

These elements coexist contextually, intertwining and mutually influencing each other, sometimes a dynamic juxtaposition, to characterize how infant death is perceived and contextualized in different historical periods and geographical areas. Although in many respects still shaded and in others widely revealed by research, these archetypal systems are still today lively present in some popular traditions and in many geographical and cultural contexts to represent how infant death involves the deepest and most irrational aspects of human life. The archetypal spaces, related to the death of newborns, possess elements rooted in the ancestral relational and behavioural system of human groups that go beyond segmentations and social characterizations. They manifest symbolic, ritual elements linked to the iconographic field which not only present traits of almost superimposable similarity, albeit at distances for which it would be risky to hypothesize cultural contaminations in the past but are also so strong as to persist through the centuries until today (Jung 1991).

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