

# THE MORTUARY TREATMENT OF CHILDREN AT LATE ROMAN/EARLY BYZANTINE (L)IBIDA (4<sup>TH</sup>–6<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES AD)

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**Abstract:** This study evaluates the treatment of children in death through an examination of the available archaeological evidence related to mortuary practices from Late Roman and Early Byzantine (L)ibida (Slava Rusă, Tulcea County, Romania). Certain components such as burial location, grave type, orientation, body position, and grave goods were analyzed based on a sample of 41 non-adult individual burials. A differential approach that involved making a comparison and highlighting the similarities and differences between non-adult and adult burials was used. The instances where adults and non-adults were buried together in the same grave were also discussed. Although differences were apparent in certain instances, it was found that children were not necessarily buried differently than adults. The limits of the study determined by the current state of research and by sample sizes are highlighted. Additionally, it is acknowledged that caution should be exercised as material remains and their interpretation only reveal a part of the entire story related to any mortuary behavior.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Scythia, antichitate târzie, arheologie funerară, copii, tratament diferențiat

**Rezumat:** Articolul discută tratamentul funerar documentat în cazul mormintelor de copii din epoca romano-bizantină descoperite în situl de la (L)ibida (comuna Slava Rusă, județul Tulcea). Pe baza unui lot de 41 de morminte individuale au fost analizate diverse elemente, precum localizarea înmormântărilor, tipurile de morminte, orientarea acestora, poziția scheletului și inventarul funerar (acolo unde este cazul). Au fost incluse în studiu și mormintele de adulți (n = 82), în cadrul unei abordări comparative care să evalueze eventuale similitudini și diferențe în ceea ce privește tratamentul funerar aplicat celor două categorii (non-adulți și adulți). Mormintele duble în care apar atât schelete (sau fragmente din schelete) de adulți, cât și de copii, au fost de asemenea discutate. Cu toate că s-a putut documenta un oarecare grad de diferențiere pentru anumite elemente ale practicilor funerare, ipoteza existenței unui tratament funerar diferențiat pe criteriu de vârstă nu se poate susține. Limitele studiului de față, rezultat al stadiului actual al cercetării și determinate de dimensiunea loturilor disponibile, sunt amintite de-a lungul textului.

## INTRODUCTION

The development of narratives on children and their mortuary treatment through the lenses of archaeology and anthropology has received an increased scholarly attention over the last decades. The 1990s were labeled “*the decade of the ancient family*”<sup>1</sup> owing to the numerous published works concerning the family in general, and women and children in particular<sup>2</sup>. Occurring at the same time, a debate in archaeology about the potential for a study of children in the past led to the emergence of the inclusion in archaeological studies of this previously marginalized category<sup>3</sup>. The growing interest in children in Roman culture can be seen as a development within this trend, by virtue of the countless studies published over the last twenty years or so<sup>4</sup>.

Notwithstanding the unavoidable occurrence of non-adults skeletal remains while excavating in an ancient cemetery, Romanian scholarship has seldom focused on such investigations of children in the past. Certain attempts deserve recognition for aiming at a better understanding of the position of children in the archaeological dossier, either by assessing the variability of the funerary practices within a given chronological and geographical framework (a regional approach – such as the study of Sarmatian children graves from the historical regions of Wallachia and Moldavia<sup>5</sup> and those from the Roman period in Dobruja<sup>6</sup>), or through the analysis of a particular sample (e.g. infant burials inside the settlement and buried in amphorae in Early Byzantine (L)ibida<sup>7</sup>, attitudes towards infant mortality in the ancient world and the mortuary treatment received by children in the

<sup>1</sup> Grubbs *et alii* 2014, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> See Bradley 1991; Dixon 1992; Demand 1994; Saller 1994, to name just a few.

<sup>3</sup> The milestone contribution in this regard is considered Grete Lillehammer’s 1989 paper *A child is born. The child’s world in an archaeological perspective*. Given the plethora of studies published on this topic, citing a few of them would not do justice to the others without ending up with an extremely long list. For the history of the field see Lillehammer 2015; 2018; Crawford *et alii* 2018.

<sup>4</sup> To better comprehend the scale of this phenomenon is useful to check out two bibliographies that are available online: Panidis’ *Children in*

*the Ancient World: A Selected Bibliography* accounting for 4860 entries (available at [https://www.academia.edu/43695502/Y\\_Panidis\\_2020\\_Children\\_in\\_the\\_Ancient\\_World\\_A\\_Selected\\_Bibliography\\_4773\\_entries\\_](https://www.academia.edu/43695502/Y_Panidis_2020_Children_in_the_Ancient_World_A_Selected_Bibliography_4773_entries_)) and the bibliography compiled by scholars from the University of Tampere with 2351 entries available at [https://www.academia.edu/30831355/CHILDREN\\_IN\\_THE\\_ANCIENT\\_WORLD\\_AND\\_THE\\_EARLY\\_MIDDLE\\_AGES\\_A\\_BIBLIOGRAPHY\\_9th\\_expanded\\_edition\\_](https://www.academia.edu/30831355/CHILDREN_IN_THE_ANCIENT_WORLD_AND_THE_EARLY_MIDDLE_AGES_A_BIBLIOGRAPHY_9th_expanded_edition_).

<sup>5</sup> Oța 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Achim 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Rubel, Soficaru 2012.