

## ADOLESCENCE DURING ANTIQUITY: THE GREEK AND ROMAN PERIODS

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### SUMMARY

**Background:** It seems important to understand how was the life of young people during the Antiquity, in the Greek cities and in Rome. Furthermore, it can be useful to find if there is a stage that marks the transition to adulthood. Finally, as the Romans are considerate to be great codifiers of laws, it seems important to study the Roman law to understand the legal conception of adolescence at this period.

**Subjects and methods:** A literature review has been done about studies published between 1962 and 2015. Those publications were found in some historical databases (as Persée, Cairns, J-Stor, OpenEdition) and in academic libraries.

**Results:** In the Greek cities, the adolescent, at 18 years old, has to do a military service called the *ephebia*. At the end of this formation, the young man, aged of 20 years old, comes back to his city. However, he has to continue his (intellectual) training until about his 30 years old. Generally, at this age, a man marries a young girl and becomes a respected adult. In the Roman law, there is no conception of legal age for the majority: the young people stay under the authority of the *pater familias* (father of the family) until the death of the father. If the father is dead: the boy becomes a pupil and has a specific juridical status until his 25 years. Two important stages exist for the young Romans: wearing the *toga virilis* (toga of manhood) and the wedding.

**Conclusions:** There is an evolution in the perception of the adolescence during the Antiquity: for the Greeks, the adolescence ends at 20 years old with an important stage, the *ephebia*. In the Roman law, there is no legal age because everyone lives under the authority of the *pater familias*.

**Key words:** adolescent – Antiquity – *ephebia* - Roman law

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### INTRODUCTION

Adolescence has always been an important period of life: it marks the end of the childhood and the beginning of adulthood. The Ancient interrogated themselves about the physical and psychological changes and tried to understand them. The focus of this review is on the Classical and Hellenistic period of Athens (V<sup>th</sup>-II<sup>nd</sup> centuries B. C.) and then to see how the Romans, influenced by the Greek cities, will position themselves about this matter.

Plato (V<sup>th</sup>-IV<sup>th</sup> centuries B. C.) sees the childhood as an animal, or even wild part of life: the child cannot control himself, he is always moving, etc. The education of the young people must teach them reason over feelings, must chain what was unchained and must free the soul. The adolescence, according to the Athenian philosopher, is an outcome towards sociability and culture (Vidal-Naquet 1981). The adolescents have to endure some initial rites that will be describe in the following point. Keep in mind that those rites take place in old societies: the place of the women is not the same as today. Thus, there are no similarities between those rites of male and female adolescence. The Greek cities are cities of men, from which women are rejected of the political life, as the strangers or slaves (Vidal-Naquet 1981). Furthermore, the Ancients categorise their men by age: the boy, the adolescent, the young man (20 years old), the adult (30 years old) and the old man. It is different for women: the little girl, the virgin, the young

bride and the wife or wife-mother (Vidal-Naquet 1981, Boehringer et al. 2015). Due to a lack of information, it is difficult to study the adolescence of the women in the Greek cities.

As the Romans expanded their military control over the Mediterranean world, Rome will enter in contact with the culture of the Greek cities, and will slowly use the same concept of education. Indeed, Athens was considered as one of the best places for the young Romans to end their scholarship. At Rome, the adolescence begins around 14 years old for the boys and 12 years old for the girls (Duport 1981, Eyben 1972, Youf 2011). This phase prepares them to the civic life: young people have a temporary weakness, are immoral and look for pleasure. To acquire virtue and reason, they must imitate their father (the *pater familias*) whom dictates them the law (Duport 1981).

Those observations lead to some questions: which formation and stages must the young people go through to become adults able to assume their civic part? Do those adolescents have obligations? As the Romans were really attached to their law, is there a specific juridical status for the young people?

### SUBJECTS AND METHODS

A literature review has been done about studies published between 1962 and 2015. Those publications were found, in the case of the articles, in some historical databases (as Persée, Cairns, J-Stor, OpenEdition) and

in universities library regarding the books. The key-words used are: ephebia, adolescence, Greek cities, Roman law.

## RESULTS

The first question is to know which stages the adolescents have to go through during Antiquity in order to become responsible citizens and to determine what are their obligations. An idea, which is found mostly in Athens in the Classical and Hellenistic times, is that the war and the wedding make an adolescent a grown-up adult (Vidal-Naquet 1981). At those periods in Athens, the adolescent follows his scholarship until his 18 years old. At this age, he becomes an ephebian, which means he enters a military organisation to be train for the battle. In order to accomplish this training, he has to leave the city and go to the forts and frontiers. In the ancient texts, the writers use the Greek word *peripoulos*, which means “turning around the city”. Thus, the adolescent has some kind of marginal status: he stands outside the civic circle (Vidal-Naquet 1968, 1981, Chankowski 2010). Everything in this formation makes him a marginal character and mostly his way to fight. A citizen must fight in a fair way and in the phalanx (a rectangular mass military formation composed of soldiers called “hoplites”) which symbolises the organisation of the city and requests the qualities of citizenship: self-control, discipline, courage and awareness of the group. The ephebian fights alone and uses ruse, which reminds more the hunting than a proper battle (Vidal-Naquet 1981). At the same time, young people learn philosophy and literature. At the end of the training, the ephebian, aged of 20 years old, celebrates the *apatouries*: a ceremony during which he offers his hair in sacrifice. This sacrifice marks his comeback to the city and his entry in the civic and military life (Vidal-Naquet 1981, Moreau 1992, Pélékidis 1962, Chankowski 2010).

It is important to understand that the ephebia is not imperative for young people, legally speaking, but is considered as an integrant part of the life of the young man, at least for the people who can afford it (Chankowski 2010). In the Classical times, the Athenian ephebia is reserved for Athenian young people, but it will change during the following periods: Hellenistics and Romans times (Chankowski 2010). This fact is certainly due to the arrival of Romans families in the Greek cities, rather attracted by literary and philosophical culture of the ephebians than by the military training (Follet 1988). Do not believe, however, that Romans, when their authority was fully established over the Greek cities, won't be interested by the Greek military training. The emperor August (I<sup>st</sup> B. C. – I<sup>st</sup> A. D. centuries) publishes a law about ephebia: it contains a strict military training. The philosophical education, as for it, find his way through public shows (Bouley 2003). The ephebia still exists for a long time: the last testimony found is from circa

262-267 A. D. (in Athens) and is probably still practised until 330 or 394 A. D. (Pélékidis 1962).

The young Greek man of 20 years old has now his full rights of citizen but is still not considered as an accomplished adult. Most of the young men pursue their education mostly around older men, with whom they often have intimate relationship. It is the wedding that makes a man an adult. Men marry around their 30 years old with young girls around 18 years old (Boehringer et al. 2015). It has been already explained that the categories of people are different following their sex. It is not unusual that the young girl is engaged sooner to her husband: during the V<sup>th</sup> century B. C. in Crete, the minimal legal age is 12 years old; a century later in Athens, it is at 14 years old (Boehringer et al. 2015).

In the Roman law, there is no legal age of civic majority. The young man stays under the authority of his *pater familias* until the death of the father. Before that moment, only the father is *sui iuris*: he is the only one who is juridically able and responsible of his acts and those of the family. However, there is a legal act that marks the life of the adolescent: the wedding. In fact, the wedding can take place at the age of puberty. In the Roman conception, one enters the adult life when he is able to procreate: 14 years old for the boys, 12 years old for the girls (Youf 2011). Some Roman jurists considered this sexual maturity as a synonym of right of citizenship (Eyben 1972). No wedding can happen without the approval of the *pater familias*. In Rome, children of 7 years old can be engaged (Youf 2011). Meanwhile, another event marks the life of the boy: wearing the toga of manhood (*toga virilis*). It means the end of the childhood, but the adolescent stays under the authority of his father (Valette-Cagnac 2003). There is however a debate between historians to know at which age this event happens: 16 or 17 years old (Valette-Cagnac 2003), between 14 and 21 years for others, according to some interpretations of several jurists (Eyben 1972), 14 or 15 years old for some other specialists (Duport 1981). Be that as it may, this stage starts the possibility, for young men, to do their military service (Duport 1981), to become orator or priest (Valette-Cagnac 2003).

An interesting case exists in the Roman law: the pupil, which means that the father of the young man died. By this fact, the young man is no longer under the authority of his father and becomes, *de facto*, *sui iuris* and *pater familias*, even if he is not pubescent yet. If the boy is not 14 years old yet, he is under the supervision of a man who has to guide him through life. Then, and until his 25 years, the young man is under a curatorship (a less strict supervision) before becoming a fully *pater familias*. The age of 25 years old marks, in a way, some kind of majority. The young man has now acquired enough maturity to behave in society. It is also the case for young people whom the father is not dead, but has given them some savings to manage on their own (Youf 2011).

## DISCUSSION

The aim of this review is, first, to understand at which age, or stage of life, someone is considered as an adolescent, and which is the main stage that marks the transition to adulthood, during the Antiquity in Greek cities and in Rome. This study also explores, broadly speaking, how are considered young people in the Roman law. One of the problems encountered is that there is very few information about women. In the field of History, there are already a lot of articles and books written about ephebia and Roman law. Thus, it is a vast subject impossible to fully cover in this publication. Furthermore, this article aims to show a brief summary of the perception of the adolescence in ancient societies, and to show its evolution. It might be interesting to complete this study by detail, century after century, the evolution of the conception of the adolescence: ephebia evolves through times (and is different in each Greek cities) as well as the Roman law.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study shows the evolution of the conception of the adolescence in Antiquity: it seems to start, in most cases, with the puberty and to last until the 20 or 25 years. In the Classical and Hellenistic Athens, the stage of transition to adulthood is marked by a military service, the ephebia, which lasts two years, between 18 and 20 years old for young men. It is also shown that it is different for women, but there is only a few information for this subject. It is only at the end of the ephebia that adolescents receive their effective citizenship. However, there are not fully adult yet: they become accomplished men around 30 years old, when they marry a young girl.

The Romans, influenced by the Greek cities, follow partially the same system. However, the Roman law determines a legal age to consider someone an adolescent: 14 years old for the boys, 12 years old for the girls. They are always under the authority of the

pater familias, who must dictate them the law until his death. If the father is dead early, the pupils enter a specific status: they are under the supervision of another man until 14 years old and under a curatorship until 25 years old. This age seems to mark, in this specific case, some kind of majority: the young man has acquired every virtue necessary to the citizenship life.

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