Children, Identity and the Past
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With one exception, the articles in this volume are based on papers presented at a conference on “Children, identity and the past”, held in Bergen, Norway, 30 March–1 April 2006. One aim of the conference, and subsequently this book, was to show how the question of children, identities and the past could be viewed from within different disciplines, like archaeology, classical studies, history, psychology, anthropology and social anthropology, art history, religious studies, natural sciences, pedagogy and museum studies. It is still the case that there are cultural variations as to what constitutes a good scientific or scholarly text, within Europe as well as globally. Each academic tradition will favour some approaches and discourage others. One important consideration when composing this volume was therefore to have many of the wide range of European scholarly traditions represented. In editing the book, it was important to us to respect this variety of cultural and academic traditions. At the same time, we wanted the papers to be presented in a language and style that would not alienate English-language readers. Hopefully, we have achieved a balance between those two considerations.

The way we see it, differences in the authors’ cultural standpoints and the views these offer on the past have become one of the most valuable assets of this volume. In addition to representing different academic disciplines and traditions, each approach is also interwoven with the personal standpoints of its author, and thus throws its own individual light on the field under study. Conceptions of children and childhood are no exception to the rule that human language and ideas are cultural, and therefore variable. In order to understand the past, we need to know as much as possible of this variation also in the present.

Editing a multi-cultural volume requires close co-operation between authors and editors. We would like to extend our thanks to the authors for their patience during the process. Thanks are also due to Bergen Museum, the University of Bergen, for making available the funding needed for preparing the manuscript for printing.
INTRODUCTION:
THE PAST–WORLDS OF CHILDREN AND FOR CHILDREN?

Liv Helga Dommasnes

Children, identity and the past

Identity and the past

The concept of identity can be approached from a number of different perspectives. In this book the approach will be historical, or rather archaeological, as most of the papers deal with the pre- or protohistoric past. In the two final chapters we also examine how the past influences children’s identities in the present.

Working within the social and historical disciplines, one becomes very much aware of the role of the past in creating and sanctioning identities. For example, common origins are sometimes conceived of as an important aspect of ethnic groups, although this idea has been modified in recent research (Barth 1969, Jones 1997, Díaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005). Most nation-states are also based on the idea of a common past going back beyond history, and which is present through archaeological artefacts and monuments (e.g. Dommasnes 2007).

As archaeology has changed from being a discipline concerned with ancient artefacts to one that studies past people, the individual has entered the archaeological field of vision. Particularly, but not exclusively, in burials, archaeologists encounter individuals from the distant past, and ascribe to them group identities as well as individual traits based on e.g. burial rites and grave gifts. It can be argued (Scott 1997, 9–10, Dommasnes 2006, 79–82) that the focus on individual identities is a modern phenomenon with little or no relevance to past societies. The idea of independent individuals is a modern conception. In many traditional societies, individuals existed through membership in a group: an ethnic group, a family or
an age group. Group membership would define rights and duties, and without the group, an individual would count for nothing. From Palaeolithic hunting bands to medieval European agricultural societies, communities have survived and been held together by individuals joining forces and acting together for the best of their group. While not depreciating completely the idea of individual identities in the past, I think it prudent to consider carefully the relationship between collective and individual identities in societies completely different from our own.

**Children and identity**

Identity is often conceptualised as something related to the adult, mature human being. That is an oversimplification. Children have identities too, and the child’s identity becomes the basis of that of the adult person. The building of identities starts in childhood, and it starts on the individual level with the very *conceptualisation of a past*, something that is not present. This conceptualisation is dependent on the child’s cognitive development (Bauer 2007), beginning perhaps with histories about family members and the recent past (Fivush 2007) and developing gradually into a full understanding of the distant past and its conceived relevance to us as humans and as groups. The understanding of past and identity is a question of maturity and develops in communication with the children’s caretakers and the community where the child is being raised (see Kaland and Hug this volume).

References to a past occur all the time in human societies, for commemorating people now deceased, for explaining why things are the way they are and for legitimisation of the existing order. The recent past and the distant past are both central ways of understanding, and one can hardly imagine a human society without a past. Telling children about the past has been part of the socialisation in traditional societies (e. g. Howe 2007) and in modern (e.g. Dommasnes 2007, Pinon and Funari 2007, Krogh this volume), as part of their education and in informal contexts.

When learning language, body language, cultural codes, religion and the history of its community, the child integrates new knowledge in its experience of self and makes it part of her or his identity. So children are confronted by the idea of a past at an early age, and schooled in its importance for understanding the ways they exist in the present. As far as we know, this has been the case in every society. One can almost claim that the sharing of values and codes developed in the past and transferred from generation to generation is part of the definition of a society. The cultural encoding process that takes place during childhood stays with the children throughout their lives. Understanding its variations in form and content is an important part of understanding past societies. Without the ability to conceptualise a past, social life would probably not be possible at all. In this sense the past is a human quality (Dommasnes and Galanidou 2007).
Most of the papers in this book focus on the distant past approached through the discipline of archaeology, addressing collective (group) identities, focussing on their contents and on differences between past and present. We aim to investigate how the identity of being a child may have been understood and experienced in past societies. An underlying question is whether the concept of *childhood* existed at all.

**Children and the past**

Presumably, it is easier for children to relate to a past where children have a place than one where they have not. From teaching archaeology to children, it is known that when children eight to eleven years old were asked to imagine what life in e.g. a Neolithic village might have been like, based on evidence from an excavation, they included boys and girls of all ages, as well as adult women and men in their interpretations (Baker 1997, 189). To these children both children and women were present through the material remains.

Moving from the classroom to the museum, I am reminded of a letter that was sent to our museum a few years ago. The letter, addressed to “The Museum”, was from two very young girls, and the subject they sought advice on was this: “Did girls hunt in the Stone Age?” They also wanted to know if girls and boys in the past had been treated the same, and if they hunted together. My understanding of this letter is that the girls sought our opinion on gender arrangements in the past, possibly because they were not convinced by the conventional views that were taught in school. It also conveys an impression that the past was important to them, and that they wanted to know about children (Dommasnes 2007). Thus, the study of children in the past is important as a way of introducing new generations to the rather complex relationship of past and present and all that it entails. Equally important is that the way people in any society relate to children from infancy through adolescence is fundamental to our understanding of basic traits and values in that society.

**The study of children in the past**

The concepts of *child* and *childhood* have been central in theoretical discussions on childhood/children’s research in archaeology (Lillehammer 1986, 1989, Sofaer Derevenski 1997, Baxter 2005, Röder, Hug and Lillehammer this volume). While the claim made by Králik *et. al.* in this volume, that the biological basis of childhood cannot be contested, seems reasonable, one should be aware of its limitations. First of all, prehistoric childhoods may have been of shorter duration than we are used to, as have people’s lifespans in general. More important is that equating biological categories with cultural ones has been natural to us, but this may have
been different in the societies that we study—they may not even have had the same “natural” categories that we recognise. In several pre-modern cultures we find that for example the boundaries between humans and animals have been fluid and permeable. The best known example of permeable boundaries between categories or species is perhaps Egypt, where pharaohs, although human, were also gods and could take animal forms. So cultural categories are not constant. Thus it is possible to imagine societies where the category child did not exist at all and others where the boundaries between child and adult were marked by other qualities than biological age alone (Baxter 2005, 18-21). The lesson to be learned is not that we should avoid conceptualisations—it is far too important a tool for that—but that we should be very much aware of the limitations of the concepts that we must use, and ready to reconsider as work is progressing.

One concept that has been consistently associated with children is “dependency” (see Hug this volume). It is hard to deny that infants of all primates depend on adults—parents—for a considerable time after birth. But there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the duration of this period can vary according to context and cultural expectations. In many western societies one need only go a few generations back to find that children past infancy were expected to be less dependent than today, and left home to find work in their early teens or earlier (Kamp 2001).

**Children in the past: an archaeological perspective**

The existence of children in the archaeological record, mainly in burials, has been recognised for a long time. In spite of this, children were seldom the focus of research. Two early Scandinavian papers focussing on children were both authored by women. One deals with the children of the Swedish early medieval town Birka (Gräslund 1973), the other discusses the possibility of identifying toys among archaeological finds (Weber 1982).

What might be called a second, and more ideologically founded, wave of interest of children in Scandinavian archaeology started with a paper focussing on children of the past and their conceived invisibility in the archaeological record (Lillehammer 1986, revised and enlarged version 1989). This paper was first published in K.A.N.—Kvinner i Arkeologi i Norge (Women in Archaeology in Norway), an equally early journal of women’s and feminist archaeology. The paper is a revised version of a lecture given as part of a Mag. Art. examination in archaeology at the University of Bergen, addressing source material and methods suitable for research on children. The topic was chosen by the examination committee, no doubt influenced by the new women’s archaeology which was then a vital part of the local academic scene, and
also by Lillehammer’s well known interest in children of the past, generated through all the “inexplicable” artefacts and traces observed at excavations, and sometimes hidden in the store-rooms of museums (Lillehammer 1986, Lillehammer personal communication).

Thus, it has been evident from the very beginning that the modern archaeology of children is also a true child of the archaeology of women. Both started with the realisation that there were groups that had been left out of the story of the human past, and that this was not only unfair, but that it made a past so biased that it was in fact untrue. Archaeologists work with material culture, where the presence of children, like that of women must be “…reconstructed from highly enigmatic data” (Wylie 1990, 31). This confronts the archaeologist with a problem of interpretation that historians and social anthropologists are spared (at least some of the time). But it was, after all, one very early achievement of feminist archaeology to be able to point out that this constraint applies to the interpretation of men and their activities as well. The initial understanding that the reason for the bias was that children and women had left very few traces in most areas, from archaeology to literature, was soon replaced by the insight that the interpretations, not the sources, were at fault, and that theorising and re-conceptualisation were indispensable tools in the project of making women visible (Conkey and Spector 1984, Dommasnes 1985). So naturally, when women entered the academic world in great numbers, interpretations informed by women’s experiences found their way into many different disciplines. Children had been very much women’s responsibility the last hundred years, and followed, so to speak, women into academic research.

Since its first beginnings, research on children in the past has developed into a vital subdiscipline, exploring the theme from various angles: research history, identifying sources, definitions of children and childhood, children’s roles in different societies, play and work, a past for children, children and materiality and how we tell children about the past. Although the study of children in archaeology has been inspired by women’s and feminist archaeology, the study of children “…the very individuals who were deemed axiomatic to gender systems” (Sofaer Derevenski 1997, 192-3) did not become an integrated part of the early women’s research or of the gender theorising within historical and anthropological disciplines. When do children become gendered? And how does the gendering process work? How do children influence the lives of adults and their gender roles? These are questions whose answers would contribute valuable insights in societies past and present, pre-modern as well as post-industrial.
The study of children in this volume

Identifying children, understanding childhood

The twelve articles in this book address children of a past stretching from the Palaeolithic to the Middle Ages from a number of perspectives and utilising many different methods and techniques. A common theme in many of the papers is finding children through identifying the traces that they have left in the archaeological record. In the very first paper in the book, Miroslav Králík, Petra Urbanová and Martin Hložek focus on imprints, traces telling us that children have been in physical contact with specific objects, from the Palaeolithic to the Middle Ages. Based on the artefacts in question, such imprints can tell of children’s play and work or, as in the case of the medieval brick from Lelekovice Castle (Králík et al. this volume, 5–7), give a fascinating glimpse of a sequence of events that took place perhaps 600 years ago. Evaluating and interpreting imprints is not a straightforward process, however. It requires both interdisciplinary cooperation and methodological considerations, as discussed in this paper.

Imprints are as close as we get to proving—if proof is needed—that there were children in the past. The only proof more definite than imprints is the remains of the children themselves, as in children’s burials. Burials are the topic of Ines Beilke-Voigt’s paper, set in northern continental Europe in Roman and Early Medieval times. Children’s burials have, of course, been recognised throughout the history of archaeology, but their interpretations have been much debated, based on the fact that there are relatively few children’s burials compared to the assumed high child mortality and on the sometimes deviant treatment and location of such burials. In many societies children were not regarded as members of the community before they had reached a certain age. In old Norse societies for example, children were sometimes left in the outfield to die (Hovstad 1980, see also Kaland this volume). Perhaps such was the case with infants elsewhere too? Or perhaps infants were sometimes sacrificed to secure the well-being of the community?

Drawing upon data from excavations, ancient written sources and ethnographical studies Beilke-Voigt addresses the problem of interpretation of infant burials in houses and settlements: infanticide, sacrifice or burials following natural deaths? She concludes that in the majority of cases, the Roman and early medieval settlement burials represent a special, but normal, burial custom for children who died naturally at a very young age, thereby also stating that although the customs varied, infants were treated as part of society, also in death.

The next chapter brings us forward in time, to Historic Ireland, and from the children who died to those who lived. Lynne McKerr sets out to investigate how
children have been recognised in earlier archaeological research. Her approach is to investigate how children of past societies have related to material culture, and the archaeologist’s (lack of) understanding of this. By studying excavation reports and discussing different categories of objects found in settlements, McKerr argues that much of the archaeological record is in fact left by children of different ages, as children could play with “adult” things as a preparation for their own adulthood. In fact, the transmission from “play” to “task” could sometimes be almost unnoticeable: as children became skilled the products of their playing gained economical value and became a real contribution to the economy. She also notes that a “traditional” material culture for infants (feeding cups, teething rings, rattles) was missing from the sites she studied, possibly because such objects were made of perishable materials. Thus McKerr demonstrates how the invisible–children–can be made visible through new approaches even to something as unimaginative (in most cases) as excavation reports.

The topic of the next article is Viking Scandinavia. Sigrid Kaland introduces us to the society of the Vikings, and especially the ways that children were treated. Lacking satisfactory archaeological finds and contexts, she turns to written sources, namely poems, sagas, and laws written down within the Christian context of the high Middle Ages, but in many cases presuming to describe conditions in the Viking Age.

Against a background of a hierarchical society and its ideology Kaland sketches the place, rights and duties of children of the different social classes, from kings to slaves. Even in this often cruel society love and loyalty were considered positive values cultivated within the families and in wider networks, where children could take part at an early age as foster children. Fostering was an institution where children were sent to substitute parents during their formative years, to learn new ways but also as a form of security in case something should happen—as it quite often did—to their biological families. High-born children were sometimes sent abroad, and in this way they learned foreign languages and manners.

Theory and methods are still an issue in most papers on children. In Brigitte Röder’s contribution, this is the main focus as she describes the road towards a theoretical and methodological basis for Swiss studies on prehistoric childhood. Gender is an important dimension in the Swiss study, along with rethinking of central concepts like *age, children* and *childhood*. In the interdisciplinary cooperation of the project, the archaeological/anthropological convention of studying children through burials was questioned, resulting in an agreement to focus on living children, that is, those who survived to live through childhood. Röder also makes the observation that many prehistoric societies were composed mainly of very young people. In archaeological interpretations, however, adult people, and mostly men, have all the important roles. Röder notes that new insights into the composition of populations
should call for reassessments of our traditional views on prehistoric and early historic societies.

Brigitta Hug, also a partner in the Swiss project, combines anthropological and psychoanalytic approaches in her article. She starts her paper with ethnographical observations from daily life in various societies, combined with personal experience. This, and her experience from working as a psychoanalyst, makes her conclude that dependency is a cross-cultural characteristic of early childhood that can also be a fruitful starting-point when studying the past. Analogies to help us understand how children were socialised, on the other hand, she suggests we base on ethnographical work. Being a psychoanalyst by profession, Hug draws on the works of Sigmund Freud. Freudian analysis takes the individual in its historic and social setting as its point of departure. The juxtaposition of these perspectives with traditional as well as post-modern archaeological approaches may open new perspectives, particularly regarding the concept of interdependency between infant and its community. In the one case, it contrasts with the tendency to see groups rather than people; in the other it is an alternative to the totally independent, “self-made” individuals of post-modern constructivism.

In the following paper, Grete Lillehammer explores aspects of the epistemologies of the archaeological concern with children through an investigation of the interception between children’s many identities in the past and our ability to conceptualise them all in the present. What is it that we conceptualise under the terms child and childhood? To what extent do we all share the same concepts? Why is it that some aspects of, or approaches to, childhood seem to evade us systematically? Can we possibly understand how children in the past thought of their own identities and sense of belonging?

One may or may not agree with Lillehammer when she seems to credit childhood research with the shift in archaeological focus that has taken place during the last decades of the second millennium, from economy and ecology to religion and ideology. But she is no doubt right in pointing out that the change has to do with the ways archaeological scholarship is conceptualised. In this sense Lillehammer’s epistemological issue is about the very soul of archaeology.

Lillehammer also draws the parallel between gender research and childhood research regarding among other things the critique against second-wave feminism for being homogenous and having a western bias. These challenges have been met—at least tentatively—within feminist and gender research (Hartsock 1998, Harding 1991, Oyerunke 2005, Haraway 2004). Childhood archaeology needs to follow suit. “We need to stretch the notion of past from the universal past to include a multitude of pasts … In this endeavour we have to decide on a common epistemology that would make future academic discourse promising.” (Lillehammer this volume p. 108-109). Is that feasible? Would it be fruitful? Or do we merely need to accept and respect the
existence of parallel epistemologies? Echoing feminist research, the question is once again very much the same: *Whose past? Whose epistemologies?*

**Socialising and education**

Socialising is a process that takes place in every society, and at many levels. Education is a more formal process that includes both behaviour and the acquisition of knowledge. Socialisation takes place *in* society, when we learn to find our place, our duties and rights, notably including gender roles. The way we think of education, it entails separating a group (pupils, young people) from the rest of society for teaching purposes. Formal education is associated with societies at a certain level of development, while learning in simpler societies (we think) took place in daily-life contexts (Goody 1989).

It is strange really, that the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation, that is the education of the young, has not become a more central issue in anthropological and historical research. Wondering whether some imperfect stone artefacts may actually have been remains from children’s trying and failing (Lillehammer 1986) marked an early phase of children’s archaeology in Scandinavia. Until one thinks concretely in terms of who is learning what, however, the mechanics and importance of the process remain elusive (see also McKerr this volume). Once again it is important to state that archaeology is about people primarily, not about structures and processes.

Socialisation and education are focussed in three papers in this volume, and touched upon in many of the others. Margarita Sánchez Romero takes us back to the Spanish Bronze Age and the ways that children were taught to become full members of their societies, practically and ideologically. The anthropological record makes it quite clear that children did and do work in many societies, and that practising in order to master progressively more complicated tasks is a way of learning. In the hierarchical Spanish Argaric culture, which was at its height in the second millennium BC, small ceramic pieces can be interpreted as toys made by children when learning to master crafts. These toys, and other objects related to children, were the carriers of cultural messages aiming at socialising the children to acquire the cultural norms and expectations.

The Bronze Age from the La Mancha area offers another example, now from burials. Children have been buried with tools and implements, sometimes miniature in size, associating them with specific tasks of work, or, as Sánchez Romero states: giving them identity. In Sánchez Romero’s opinion, the funerals indicate that children were included in the ritual and ideological life of society. This is an important observation, pertinent to the general importance of children/young people
in many ancient societies, also pointed out by Röder in this volume. Seen from our academic and often secular perspectives, we tend to forget, and even doubt, that children could participate in religious rites from a very young age. I shall return to this point below.

Classical Greece is considered the cradle of European civilisation. In recent decades, much focus has been on the fact that the Athenian democracy was not a very including institution. It was for men only, and only those who were members of the city state. One would expect that if women had no political rights, there would be no system for educating girls either. Edith Specht sets out to show that such was not the case. But not unexpectedly it is demonstrated that gender roles and expectations played important roles in the education. On a superior level, the goal was to create good and useful citizens, whose actions were inspired by insight. Even so, schools were private. There is, however, evidence that women knew how to read and write, which suggests some form of formal learning. And there were institutions for teaching girls athletics (a strong body was important for the future bearing of healthy children) and musical skills. Sometimes contests were organised where the young girls could measure their skills against each other. One institution for women’s education was widely known, namely the school of the poetess Sappho at Lesbos, which attracted pupils from all over the Greek world. The education at Sappho’s house was athletic as well as intellectual and religious.

Religious education is, as already mentioned, a field systematically neglected by archaeologists. This is surprising today, when symbolism and ideology have once again become not only legitimate, but vital fields of archaeological study. Even so, we tend to forget that religious insight must be learned. As in most other fields, religious learning often takes the form of participation. In his contribution, Henrik von Achen takes us to the early Middle Ages and the religious education within the Roman Catholic Church. The early Middle Ages was a missionary period, and the methods of teaching must take into account both the fact that most of the new believers knew very little about Christianity and the fact that most of the congregation was illiterate, children and adults alike. So, when adapting the teaching to the congregation, the division line ran not between children and adults, but between the literate—mainly the clergy—and the illiterate. A visual language, religious art, was created to bring the Gospel to the people. To a certain extent, this art was formalised, so that it could function as a support for memory. Children as such were not especially targeted in the religious education, nor were they visible in religious art. Children had to learn like everybody else, by repetition, understanding more with increasing maturity.

The distinction made in von Achen’s paper between literate and illiterate rather than between children and adults is an important one with a great potential in the study of social memory and tradition in non-literate societies, and also in understanding the functions of symbols, from rock art to ornamentation on all kinds
of objects. It is also a reminder that we must learn to think of children as active agents in their communities. Sometimes age was a dividing line, sometimes other qualities, like literacy, or more generally, knowledge, would be more important. Religious education has no doubt taken place in prehistory as well as in the middle ages, and religious outlooks acquired through such education have coloured the lives of people.

**Teaching the past to children of today**

The past is an important element in children’s education. In modern western societies we teach about the past in schools, in museums and through informal media like children’s books, films and video games. Two of the papers in this volume address formal teaching of the past.

The first one, by Mia Krogh, is set in the northernmost part of Norway, and within the cultural context of the Sami culture. The approach is local: how to help children create their dual identities as Sami as well as members of the Norwegian nation. In Norway, the presence of a Sami population is attested as far back as there are written sources and the Samis now have the status of an indigenous group. There is also a concept of the Sápmi, or Sami nation, which includes the Samis in several nation states in the Arctic sphere. Sápmi cross-cuts the borders of modern national states and is meant to function as a reminder of solidarity at another level. The relations between ethnic Norwegians and Samis have gone through many phases, sketched by Krogh in her paper. This history is also part of our identities.

Being a minority group, the Samis have been in danger of losing their history through Norwegian/Scandinavian domination. The relatively new (founded 1995) Sami Museum in Norway’s northeasternmost county has targeted schoolchildren in their dissemination of Sami culture, based on the reasoning that the future of Sami culture lies with the children. The philosophy and didactical approach described is unconfontational and open-ended in a way that allows children to create their own identities based on knowledge of the local past and their future as citizens of a global world.

Challenges of the global world are also the main concern in the last paper in this volume. Here, Nena Galanidou takes as her point of departure the pedagogical principles of the French thinker Edward Morin. These principles, combined with Galanidou’s claim that the Palaeolithic past is well suited for illustrating some of the challenges facing coming generations in terms of global warming and the greenhouse effect, make up the warp of her analysis of children’s book descriptions of life in the Palaeolithic.
These books are illustrated, and Galanidou finds that even when the authors try to avoid stereotypical descriptions of the Palaeolithic, illustrators do not. In analysing a sample of eleven illustrated books published in Greece, France and the United Kingdom, she finds that in most of the books, people of the Palaeolithic are described as simple, with very little technological or other knowledge to help them master a dangerous environment. Men are the leaders in all areas of life, with women and children playing minor parts. Many of the texts are written in an authoritative tone and do not open for questions or alternative interpretations. Most important of all, none of the authors use the opportunity to tell the children about the great climatic changes that took place during the Palaeolithic, and the ways they influenced humans and animals. In an age when dramatic environmental changes are again threatening humanity, this could be a way of underlining the unity of past and present in a global perspective, Galanidou claims.

Stereotypes and missed opportunities do not only characterise books on the Palaeolithic. It can be found in children’s books on other pre- and protohistoric periods as well. It is easy to agree with Galanidou that the writing, including the dissemination to the public in general, of archaeology should be re-addressed, and that archaeologists should recognise their part of the responsibility for telling children about the past.

Children in past societies

In spite of the increasing body of work on children and childhoods in the past, children are still more or less invisible in conceptions of prehistoric societies, and in the grand narratives of development and change.

The conclusion seems inevitable: children of the past have been ignored because they were not considered important. Presumably they did not contribute much to their communities, and we, today, have little to learn from the study of children in the past. Stated like that, the claim is obviously unreasonable. Being a child—in terms of biology—and growing into maturity is one of the few experiences all humans have in common, irrespective of the cultural content or duration of childhood in different cultures.

So, what can the study of children contribute to the study of the past? The papers in this volume point at several potentially fruitful approaches. I shall comment on a few: burials, demography, social structure and socialisation/education. But first of all I want to discuss briefly a possible frame of reference for the study of children.
Standpoint theories

If one accepts that childhood (infancy) in any culture implies an element of dependency, a fruitful approach to its study may be that of standpoint theories. These theories, originally socialist approaches, argue that any society is best understood from the position of the underprivileged. The privileged classes have power, money and the influence to form society according to their own needs. The underprivileged—the weaker, the powerless, the children?—must adapt to rules made by others. Where the privileged meet no problems, the underprivileged encounter all kinds of physical and formal obstacles. This, on the other hand, makes them better equipped to understand the ways that society functions. In recent years standpoint theories have been developed and refined within the framework of feminist thinking (e.g. Harding 1991, 1998, Haraway 2004). In Harding’s words, feminist standpoint research begins with women’s lives (Harding 1991, 123), and is achieved through political activism. An important concept in Harding’s version of standpoint research is that of “strong objectivity”, meaning that by being aware of one’s standpoint/bias (Harding 2004, 137) and integrating this knowledge in the research, one can achieve a better form of knowledge than those who really think that it is possible to be an uninterested subject.

In the same way children’s research should take children’s lives as its point of departure. Political activism in the present has made us aware of injustice towards children on a global scale. In an effort to remedy this, the United Nations, the European Union, national parliaments, museums and other local institutions all invest resources in securing good childhoods for the children of this world, cf. articles by Lillehammer and Galanidou this volume. In the process, scholars within various academic disciplines have questioned the foundations of our conceptualisations and alleged understanding of children and childhoods in different cultural settings. This work is also well underway within archaeology, and has brought new insights that are at least making it possible to think of studying the distant past from children’s standpoints. A further step would be, in those cases where it seems that children have been made unjustly dependent or otherwise underprivileged, to review what is known about the society in question from the basis of children’s lives. These would be new perspectives to most archaeologists, and would bring insights to enrich the knowledge of prehistoric lives in general.

Present and past norms

The notion of justice and privileges inherent in standpoint theories involves a kind of stable standard which must by necessity be based in the culture of the researcher. Insofar as this is the only standard in sight, the research will tell more about the
present—which is also an important function of any historical discipline—than of subjective feelings of justice and privileges in the past. These must be measured by the standards of the culture in question. Learning about the past standards is one of the ultimate goals of archaeology, and can only be achieved by investigating the culture from a number of relevant standpoints: children, women, men, slaves, farmers, soldiers and even rulers. Whether one should also evaluate the findings from a moral point of view, is a separate question, which belongs entirely to the present. It is essential, however, not to confuse these two approaches.

Taking children seriously

Many scholars have noted that the study of children in archaeology has to a great degree been based on burials, even when the aim of the study was not religion or rites as such. As in women’s archaeology, the concern with burials had initially to do with the need to identify the object of research.

It has been generally assumed that child mortality was high in the societies that we study. In spite of this, children’s graves are sometimes not very common. When children’s burials have been discovered, they have often been in other places and followed different rites from those of adults (see Beilke-Voigt this volume), although cases to the contrary are also known (Lillie 1997, Rega 1997, Sánchez Romero this volume). Sometimes children’s burials have been interpreted as objects of sacrifice rather than normal interments, thus setting children apart from the rest of society (Beilke-Voigt this volume). The active roles of children in religious life in the distant past are still an almost unresearched field.

This focus on burials meant that the lives of children have been interpreted from a small group among those who did not survive. One could also suggest as a hypothesis that the younger a child was at death, the less the burial rites would be adapted to the deceased as a person with an individual history. This could be one interpretation of the distribution of grave goods in different age-groups (Sánchez Romero this volume).

My next observation relates to demography. Recent research has shown that about 50% of the population in most prehistoric societies must have been less than eighteen years old (Chamberlain 1997, 249). An estimate based on the Swiss Neolithic burial site of Lenzburg (Röder this volume) suggests that more than 60% of the population must have been younger than twelve years. As observed by Röder, such an age composition must have consequences for the ways that we think of prehistoric societies: Unlike ours, prehistoric societies were made up mainly of young people. Taking this into consideration, it becomes very plausible that people who would be
termed children in our culture contributed significantly to the economic survival in prehistoric societies, and also that they filled important functions in many other aspects of social life. Probably these age groups were indispensable in keeping daily life going. Young people were social agents in their own right, and not necessarily dependent on adults. In terms of numbers, they were a potentially powerful group. Did they use this power? If a ten year old took part in daily work and generally fended for herself, would she or he still be a child? Do we (want to) study her as a child?

It is conceivable that in many cultures biological dependency was replaced by a culturally imposed one tempering the potential power of these age groups by defining them as children. It seems probable though, that in societies where the general life expectancy was also low compared to ours, people were considered adult from a much earlier age than we would expect. There are even societies where age is not an important factor in defining children (Fortes 1984), but most societies seem to recognise it, and mark the passing from childhood to adulthood with rituals conferring new status, new duties and privileges, including in many cases power and influence in new spheres of life.

One should not jump to the conclusion that all children in the past have been underprivileged. As mentioned above, the percentage of people younger than eighteen years of age means that they must have made up an important part of the production force in most societies. There is no reason to believe that their contribution has never been recognised. Again it would depend on the power structures of the society in question. Anthropological research suggests that learning in preindustrial societies, where it often takes the form of participation in daily tasks, is gendered, so that girls learn from women and boys learn from men (Keith 2005). It is a reasonable assumption that the statuses and power of gendered children would relate to that of adults. This means that in order to understand childhoods of the past, the investigation must address the gendering of children. Otherwise, the knowledge would be incomplete at best, cf. Specht, Röder, Sánchez Romero and Galanidou this volume.

But even such incomplete knowledge can act as a catalyst for thought. Imagine living in a world where the child mortality was at least 50% (Chamberlain 1997, 249) but where still more than half the inhabitants were younger than twelve years old, as in the above mentioned Lenzburg case. Among the other half, relatively few may have lived to the age of fifty or more. The “children” would have taken part in most of the work and probably also influenced the division of work, social structure, the distribution of power and religious outlook etc.

It is something of a paradox that in communities composed of predominantly very young people, death must have been much more of an everyday occurrence than in modern societies where older people are in the majority. Fifty per cent infant
mortality would mean that infancy was a very dangerous period. Young people—children—saw people of their own age dying, and they learned that death was ever present.

For a society to be stable, a great many children must therefore be born. Among the something less than fifty per cent made up by adults, less than half again would have been women in fertile ages. So all these children, those who were to live and those who died, were born by a limited number of women during a few years of their lives. To many women the onset of fertility also signified the ending of their own lives, as death in childbirth would have been a common occurrence. The combination of these factors tells us that parenthood would have been of short duration in many cases, and a number of the “children” would have lost their parents at an early age. Thus the concept of family and its role in socialising children needs re-thinking.

The children also witnessed the connection between giving life and death through the destinies of women. No wonder then that in many religions life and death are so closely connected that they are almost two sides to the same coin (see e.g. Huntington and Metcalf 1979). In this light it is also no surprise that the gods of life and death were often women (see e.g. Ellis Davidson 1998), even in strongly patriarchal systems like the old Norse (Näsström 1998). Regarding children, one could claim that not only did they witness the connection between life and death, they were this connection embodied.

Conclusions

Children should be studied as children, not as someone waiting to become adult or as obstacles to the career plans of adults, claims Baxter (2005, 5-7). In this I think she voices the credo of modern children’s archaeology: children are interesting in their own right, and should be studied as far as possible on their own terms. The quest for meaningful definitions of children and childhoods must be seen against this background. And it is not difficult to agree that the study of children and childhoods as such is important. It is based on an experience shared in some way by the entire humanity, and therefore central to the understanding of the human condition.

Making children agents of the past is in fact a way to create more multivocal and in a sense truer master narratives for us all. The past will never be the same after its children have entered the scene... What came as a surprise to me, an amateur in the field of children’s research, was the realisation of the impact that the study of children is bound to have on the study of past societies in general. The consequence of a past of children is children as agents to an extent and in areas one would not have imagined, and consequently fewer, and less influential, adults. New insights into the distribution of age groups and population structures challenge us to reconsider prehistoric community life, to consider the implications of such young populations
Introduction

for society and for each individual much the same way as when women of the past were made visible a few decades ago. There is one difference, however: in the gender discourse there seems to be no restraints to guide us in choices between alternative interpretations, since we seem to be unable to agree on a starting point either on the ontological status of gender or the understanding of sex. When it comes to children, their relation to age is at least definite. Whatever the contents and limitations of prehistoric childhoods, the fact remains that it has got to do with very young people and that they seem to have made up the majority of many societies (if the statisticians are to be believed, that is). This is a firm starting point for new interpretations, and provides a direction to future work. In terms of archaeological record it means that children have been present all the time. Most of the material we find has been made and used by age groups we would call children: old finds, new visions.

In the endeavour of re-assessing our pasts, we shall need to mobilise our faculties to look for, and understand similarities beyond differences: although the experience of having been a child is shared by us all, long and protected childhoods is not a common human experience that we share with the past. They do happen sometimes, but in many societies people have started preparing for death at the age when our children start thinking of moving away from home.

One arena where the contribution of children is under-researched is that of religious life. The presumably central position of children in many prehistoric societies seems to argue for a rather central role for children in many religious/ritual systems. The issue is addressed in at least three papers in this volume (Sánchez Romero, Specht and von Achen). Hopefully others will be encouraged to explore further this aspect of the past, so important for understanding children’s lives.

It is perhaps not accidental that this volume opens and ends with papers dealing with the Palaeolithic. Although this period is not represented everywhere—for example evidence of Palaeolithic settlement has not been found in Scandinavia—and life at that time was very different from ours, it still represents our common origins, history before the development of diverse and sometimes antagonist cultures, a history that we all share as humans. This is one reason why the Palaeolithic may be a fruitful door-opener to introducing the past to children. Another reason is that we are today facing challenges of the same kind that destroyed the Palaeolithic world, as pointed out by Galanidou in the final paper in this volume. The deep past has got a lesson to teach us which shows the relevance of historical awareness on a global scale.

Notes

1 Magister Artium. Now obsolete degree, to be best compared to a PhD from a renowned Anglo-American university.
Acknowledgment

I want to thank my colleague Else Johansen Kleppe for drawing my attention to the letter from the two girls seeking information on Stone Age gender arrangements.

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