# Abandoned Children

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## 2 Circulation of children in eighteenth-century Portugal

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Although child abandonment has traditionally been linked to infanticide, poverty and welfare, wet-nursing and adoption, it is instructive to consider it in a different context, namely that of the circulation of children in preindustrial societies. In these societies many children were not breastfed by their own mothers but put out to wet-nurses. Furthermore, many children were entrusted to households other than their own to receive education and others were simply handed over as apprentices or as servants at an early age. All these transfers of responsibility imply that parents spent little time with their own children and that children, besides moving from family to family, might be dispersed over large geographical areas. In this context, child abandonment can be seen as one extreme of a range of practices characterized by the movement of children across geographic areas and between family units. Anthropologists have long studied the circulation of children in contemporary communities: Esther Goody (1970 and 1982) drew attention to the phenomenon in West African populations, as did Claudia Fonseca (1986) in her study of poor children in Brazilian squatter cities and Ann Beth Waltner (1981) in Chinese areas, using a historical perspective. In the work of these anthropologists, the term 'circulation of children' serves to designate children temporarily or permanently entrusted to persons other than their biological parents. It is to Jack Goody (1969) that we owe the best theoretical approach to the subject, in which the key point is the differentiation between fostering and adoption. More recently, the political and social issues concerning adults' transactions with children have been pointed out by Bledsoe (1990). An evolutionary analysis of the same phenomenon by Hrdy (1992) has used the term 'delegated motherhood' to encompass the range of situations in which children are cared for beyond the immediate family. Historical research reveals that the foundling system that arose in Europe as early as the thirteenth century can be described in these terms.

#### The European foundling system

Whereas in late antiquity and the early middle ages societies dealt with child abandonment without the mediation of public institutions (Boswell 1988), from the thirteenth century onward European foundlings were increasingly cared for by hospitals and confraternities. Although the Innocenti in Florence was established early on (Viazzo et al., this volume), in general local ruling powers took steps to shelter abandoned children long before foundling homes were set up and provided a range of services for children.

There was a secular progression across Europe in the implementation of hospital care for foundlings: in Italy in the thirteenth century, in Spain in the fifteenth and sixteenth, and in Portugal and France in the seventeenth. Many of these institutions were devoted to the care of both children and sick adults. The eighteenth century witnessed a boom in the establishment of foundling homes throughout southern Europe, with each province or administrative area setting up institutions designed to assist abandoned children. In the second half of the century foundling hospitals spread in northern and central Europe; in Russia, Germany and England they were limited to the most important cities and tended to be short lived in comparison with their southern counterparts. Not only were foundling hospitals set up rather later in the Protestant countries, but the services they provided were not quite the same as those developed in the south. In Germany there was vigorous public debate before their establishment (Ulbricht 1985: 211-56), and in England, too, London's foundling hospital was criticized by contemporaries (Taylor 1978–9: 292–3). Such controversies would have been unthinkable in southern Europe, where there was no serious public debate on abandonment before the nineteenth century. In Russia the foundling hospitals assumed the character of a megalomaniac utopia under Empress Catherine II and her ministers (Ransel 1988: 31-8). In England, Christ's Hospital, initially designed to include foundlings among its pensioners, was soon converted into a grammar school from which foundlings were almost totally excluded (Pearce 1908: 26, 37). The London foundling hospital, in turn, admitted children only irregularly except during the brief General Reception of 1756-60 (MacClure 1981: 105-9).

#### Attitudes to foundlings

With the infrastructure of institutional care so amply provided for abandoned children, it almost goes without saying that the act of abandoning was not itself a crime. Under seventeenth-century jurisprudence, aban-

donment was legal provided that the child was left in a place where its life would not be immediately endangered and where it would be promptly succoured, and that the parents were poor or the mother's honour was endangered to the detriment of her prospects of marriage. Abandonment was, indeed, not only legal, but positively encouraged by the political authorities: both Absolutism and the Enlightenment stressed the importance of a large population for the well-being of nations. The death of foundlings or illegitimate children was viewed as a political loss for the state and a waste of potential subjects for sovereigns. Some writers even suggested that in the case of illegitimate children private vices led to public benefits (Taylor 1978-9: 295). Projects were drawn up for the employment of foundlings in the army, the colonization of underpopulated areas or emigration overseas. In Russia foundlings were to form a new class of individuals trained to be the ideal citizens of a state of the Enlightenment era, filling the gap created by the absence of a bourgeoisie (Berelowitch 1991: 171-82). In France, foundlings were sent to Louisiana or to Algiers (Aragon 1987: 390; Jeorger 1987: 375; Mérien 1987: 429-30), and Napoleon proposed the creation of a special military corps of foundlings - an idea doomed to failure (Colavolpe 1987: 409-20; Jeorger 1987: 380).

These projects had one thing in common: they viewed foundlings as a stock of children at society's disposal. The state could redistribute the mass of children without families according to its needs. The justification for this was that foundlings were, of course, a charge on public finances, and it was felt that the state, having spent money on their upbringing, was entitled to exercise authority over them. In this way, preoccupations with the future of foundlings were bound up with the need to render a previous investment profitable. In practice, most foundling hospitals developed an official patria potestas over foundlings: their origin was considered to be the place where they had been abandoned, and the foundling hospital itself was their 'father'; if the state paid for their upbringing, it would have paternal power over them. In reality, however, the lives of foundlings were quite different from the projects conceived on their behalf by politicians and theorists. The small proportion of foundlings surviving to adolescence and adulthood sufficed in itself to defeat such schemes.

#### Anonymous abandonment and its consequences

In southern Europe abandonment was generally anonymous, although some exceptions can be found (Fujita 1987: 330; Vigni 1982: 684). Anonymity was made possible by the existence of conventional sites from which children would be promptly conducted to the hospital premises,

for example the baptismal font in the cathedral, the doorstep of a person in charge of distributing abandoned children to wet-nurses, the entrance of the hospital, or a basket placed in the neighbourhood of the hospital and hidden from general view. More than all these, however, the single feature of the institutional system which increased the efficiency of abandonment, preserving anonymity and allowing the immediate reception of the child into the hospital premises, was the wheel (see Panter-Brick, this volume).

Anonymous abandonment had serious consequences for the foundling hospitals. Because they could not select children or limit their numbers, they were unable to control the expenditure required (see Smith, this volume). Attempts were often made to restrict admissions to illegitimate children, but no hospital is known to have entirely succeeding in doing so, and there were often complaints about the large number of legitimate children abandoned. In spite of anonymity, many children were abandoned with signs or messages that would allow their parents to identify them later. Few parents did in fact claim their children back, but the widespread occurrence of identifying tokens implies their wish to retain a potential link or simply a reluctance to admit that separation from their children was final.

Anonymity also provided opportunities for abuse of the foundling system. As hospitals allowed parents to reclaim children without having to repay any costs, it became possible for abandoners to have their children maintained at public expense until they judged it opportune to reclaim them. Further, if through corruption parents were given access to hospital records, they could follow their child to its nurse, taking a hand in its upbringing and giving the wet-nurse extra pay. The child's own mother was sometimes by subterfuge hired as wet-nurse, and here the separation of mother and child was restricted to the short period of residence in the foundling hospital. Thus a proportion of children were not true foundlings, being maintained within their natal families at public expense. These frauds required the complicity of hospital staff, and although their frequency cannot be precisely quantified, it is likely that documented frauds were only a small proportion of those which actually occurred.

A common feature of this system was the transport of children from rural areas to the urban centres where the foundling hospitals were situated. Infants travelled long distances (often up to 100 kilometres) and must have been accompanied by caretakers. Once inside the foundling hospitals, children continued to be circulated. Most institutions functioned as centres for the rapid redistribution of children to wet-nurses living on the outside. It was never the case that significant numbers of

children were brought up entirely on the premises, and except in Spain (Soubeyroux 1978: 573) wet-nurses living in the countryside were preferred. Thus many children, having originated in rural areas, were sent again into the country, where it was intended that they remain throughout their upbringing.

There was in fact an extensive market in wet-nursing, and with all strata of society choosing to have their children nursed there was a hierarchy of wet-nurses. In England, according to Newell (1990: 132–3), the nurses who fostered parish children, often widowed mothers, came from lower socio-economic groups than those who nursed the children of wealthier parents from London or other towns. The best-paid and probably the highest-status wet-nurses were those who boarded in the houses of the well-to-do. There was also a great demand on the part of private individuals for wet-nurses in areas surrounding the cities. The wet-nurses employed by foundling hospitals tended to be the poorest, to be the least well-endowed with breast-milk and to live farthest from the urban centres.

Wet-nurses might resort to a range of duplicitous tactics. They might replace a dead foundling with another child, perhaps their own; they might postpone the announcement of a foundling's death so as to continue to receive their wages; and they might re-abandon the foundling or, concealing their lack of milk or their own pregnancy, pass it on to another woman in the household or neighbourhood. Such deceptions have been reported from all over Europe. What is significant for my argument is the further evidence they provide that children were widely circulated and exchanged.

#### The social and legal integration of foundlings

The age at which children left nurse care varied across Europe. In some areas they stayed with their nurses only during breast-feeding, while elsewhere they stayed from five to sixteen years, commonly returning to the foundling home after seven. Italian practice was exceptional in that children remained in institutional care until adulthood, when for girls a marriage was sought by the institution and a dowry provided (Kertzer, this volume).

After their return to the hospital, the children were redistributed in a variety of ways. They might be returned again to their wet-nurses, this time with the status of informally adopted children. They could be given to other people who would foster them in return for their labour or even integrate them as family members. Finally, they might remain in the hospital and be put to work for the hospital's benefit (Di Giorgio 1982:

96–8; Aguerre Hohl 1978: 17–47; Vallecillo Capilla and Olagüe de Ros 1982: 235). Of course, the sexual division of labour imposed different destinies on foundling girls and boys (see Kertzer, this volume). Boys were generally given as apprentices to local craftsmen, either informally or with apprenticeship contracts signed before the notary. Boys might also be channelled into the army or navy. Girls, in turn, could be given as domestic servants or might remain in the protected institutional environment (Jones 1982: 91; Venancio 1988: 59).

Integration into the foster family depended on its ability to absorb a new member, and this depended in part on the local importance attributed to blood ties. In areas where the family was essentially a group related by blood, full integration would be difficult. In circumstances in which childlessness had left a family with no heirs, however, a foundling might be welcome. Foundlings could also be integrated through marriage (Cavallo 1983: 413–15). There was no single pattern but a wide range of situations from the recruitment of a factory worker or domestic servant to full integration as an adopted child.

Further evidence for grades of integration is shown by the existence of several types of adoption, as was the case in Murcia (Fresneda Collado and Elgarrista Domeque 1987: 108–9). Alvarez Santaló (1980: 101) has suggested that there was no adoption in the modern sense, with the transmission of social status and family names, since foster parents often gave 'adopted' foundlings back to the institution. It is likely that the flexibility of the inheritance system influenced integration: where non-kin were allowed to inherit, formal adoption might be unnecessary. In Portugal, for example, 'unequal partibility' prevailed, a person being free to dispose of a third of his property to those of his own choosing.

In Porto, Portugal, the placement of a foundling at seven years of age, when hospital care usually ended, cannot properly be regarded as adoption. In Portuguese jurisprudence three procedures could bestow formal power over a child: adoption, arrogation and legitimation. Both adoption and arrogation required the child's own authorization and so were clearly limited to older children: in effect, for a child to act *sui juris* (by its own judgement) it had to be at least seven years old. Adoption was also formally authorized by the biological father and did not imply a full transfer of responsibilities. Arrogation allowed fatherless children to join another family in a ceremony presided over by the king or his representative (Bremer 1749: 42–5). Legitimation (for illegitimate children) may have been used as a device in adoption, but it is rare in notarial records. None of these legal devices is much mentioned in the sources, and they were perhaps remote from the circumstances of the real social world of the foundlings and their families. I would suggest that their scarcity

implies that there was little social pressure for such formality and that the more casual practice of taking children into a family from the foundling hospital was preferred precisely because it avoided bureaucracy and binding social responsibilities.

Although the registers state that boys taken into a foster family after age seven should be treated as sons, they do not state that they should become full family members with inheritance rights equal to those of other children. In only a few cases do the registers mention the promise of a future inheritance or the donation of property, while mention is often made of the family's commitment to teach a trade or to pay wages. The status of a foundling must have been halfway between that of an offspring and that of a servant or apprentice. When we recall that the rights of a father over his children were similar to those of a master over his servants and slaves, the ambiguous status of foundlings is more readily understood.

In the context of practices promoting the circulation of children, legal considerations are significant chiefly for their absence. Informality permitted flexibility, which meant that families could incorporate a foundling and increase in size without dealing with the complex problems of property transmission and, at the same time, administrators could deal with different cases according to their circumstances, with minimum intervention in the case of children who remained members of the wetnurses' households. Furthermore, foster families could later reject the children, bringing them back to the foundling hospital, and children could escape from foster parents and be placed by administrators with other families. Sometimes the administrators might decide that particular foster parents were not suitable for the child and contact others. The registers also note occasions when a child was refused to families that had previously fostered foundlings, perhaps in view of the likely financial burden of these children when the time came to pay them wages (at age twelve for boys and fourteen for girls).

In only a few cases do we know the fate of foundlings who reached adulthood: the best studies to illuminate this issue are those based on family reconstitution, where lineages which include foundlings can be detected (Berrino, 1990: 103–26). Institutional records state only the children's occupations immediately after leaving the hospital, and their activities may well have changed in the course of adolescence. The case of Lazarillo de Tormes from Salamanca is an anecdotal example of the varied lives such young people may have led: he served eight different masters after his widowed mother entrusted him to a blind beggar on the occasion of her remarriage (Anonymous 1554). For a more systematic study of the system in action as a device for the circulation of children to

the advantage of a number of interest groups, I turn to an analysis of the eighteenth-century archives of the foundling hospital of Porto.

### Eighteenth-century Porto's surplus children

Although measures designed to assist a small number of foundlings had been implemented before the foundation of Porto's foundling hospital in 1689, children were abandoned in large numbers only after its opening. The Casa da Roda attracted children and wet-nurses from a wide area, with more than 60,000 foundlings during the century as a whole, and this in a city whose population had barely reached 40,000 by the end of the century. Some of the 'success' of the foundling hospital as a public institution was due, as emphasized above, to its flexibility in use. Thus children were accepted without reservation, regardless of geographical origin or status; parents could reclaim their children, of any age, from the hospital without having to repay expenses; and wet-nurses or other families could take in the children informally, even before the child's seventh birthday (the conventional date for transfer at Casa da Roda).

Very few of the children would have been lost without trace in the crowds of foundlings under institutional care, but only a small proportion were formally reclaimed by their families. Only 8.8 per cent of the children in a sample of nearly 6,000 were recovered alive by their families, and only about 20 per cent of these parents reimbursed the administrators for their expenses (Sá 1992: 221, 282). Not all the parents who came for their children did so willingly; in some cases the administration was able to establish the parents' identity and compel the child's return, though it was possible for the child to be re-abandoned with almost total impunity.

Although the mortality of foundlings was indeed higher than that of children brought up in their own families, the proportion of children dying before their seventh birthday did not exceed 63 per cent in all the cohorts observed (Sá 1992: 218). This rate is certainly high, although less dramatic than might have been expected from comparative reports. Surviving children were placed in foster homes, and it was rare for a child older than seven to remain in hospital care. Because there was no way to limit the intake of abandoned children, the foundling home became crowded. All in all, the Casa da Roda provided a means of disposing of children where a surplus was the rule. It operated as a leveller between the number of children a family could rear at a given moment and the number of children available in the general population, maintaining a permanent

stock of available children which could be claimed either by their biological relatives or by unrelated families.

The mobility of children occasioned by abandonment was substantial: foundlings were transported from the countryside to the town and back again, and they moved from their families of origin into one or more other households, sometimes to return to their natal families, and sometimes to become permanent members of other households. Alongside the recruitment of municipal wet-nurses of the Casa da Roda there was a parallel market for private wet-nurses. Together, these represent a situation of high circulation of children.

#### The value of foundlings

The Casa da Roda case shows how an entire society, from the state to employers, parents and childless couples, could benefit from the abundance of available children. These children were of economic, reproductive, military, and social or legal value to a variety of constituencies.

Abandoned children had economic value because the sale of breastmilk provided wet-nurses and their families with a supplementary source of income. They also served to increase the geographical sphere of economic activity. Most of the parishes where wet-nurses lived were a day's walk from the city or several hours by carriage or boat, and wet-nurses were supposed to come to the city to collect their payments every three months, either accompanied by the foundling in their care or with certification from the parish priest that it was alive. Thus the increasing involvement of rural areas in the breast-feeding of foundlings played an impor-tant role in the developing relationship between the city and the countryside, breaking down the isolation of the rural hinterland. The area between these parishes and the city of Porto showed a dearth of foundlings' wet-nurses which remains to be explained. The absence of suitable wet-nurses in these areas is not a credible hypothesis. Most likely, women in the rural parishes close to the city dominated the market for private wet-nurses, while the foundlings' wet-nurses lived in poorer and more distant localities, receiving lower pay.

Nurses were expected to have weaned their own children before engagement, in conformity with the norm that women should not breast-feed more than one nursling at a time. In fact, the conditions for eligibility as a nurse were elaborate, though the administrators and parish priests had little power to counter the deceptions which were common practice (women often claimed, sometimes truthfully, that their own children had died and thus their milk was 'young'). Wet-nurses were expected to have

breast-fed their own children for just over a year, thirteen months being the modal 'young' age of milk in these cases. They might then nurse a sequence of foundlings, with their milk 'ageing' accordingly. Prolonged lactation would confer both contraceptive effects and economic benefits which did not depend on the survival of any one individual foundling. However, some wet-nurses were motivated to replace a lost child: Porto's records show that a third of wet-nurses whose children had died 'adopted' a foundling, compared with a quarter of those whose own children were alive. In a context in which high infant mortality together with high celibacy and late marriage were operating to reduce fertility, foundlings were available to take the place of dead or longed-for children.

The presence of a foundling in a family also had military significance. According to Portuguese law, a family that adopted a foundling without payment before its seventh birthday would be rewarded in several ways. It would be allowed to keep the child, unless it was claimed by its own family, and the husband of the nurse and the couple's natural children would be exempted from military duties, with the foundling joining the army in their place. The existence of these privileges indicates the need for a supplementary stimulus to women to become wet-nurses beyond the incentive of their salaries.

On reaching seven years of age, foundlings were placed with foster families. Children who survived the high rates of childhood mortality, about a third of all foundlings, were taken in by their wet-nurses or by childless couples or single women. There was often a clear intention on the part of wet-nurses to continue accepting foundlings until one of them survived long enough to be fostered. In addition, many of the 'dry-nurses' (who cared for children already weaned) are on record as having no children of their own, which may reveal their motivation for taking a foundling. Fostering was easy from the legal point of view and did not impose civil obligations on the parents such as exist in adoption today.

The majority of foundlings were fostered by the wet-nurse's family. Other families that took in foundlings were usually from the same parish or church as the wet-nurse or recommended by her. These families, too, sometimes took in more than one child and were mostly artisans (or, less commonly, farmers) for whom the foundling home served as a source of additional labour (see Kertzer, this volume). By the end of the eighteenth century, factory administrators begin to be mentioned in the registers, suggesting that the higher social strata, too, came to foundling homes to take children, who would probably be no more than servants in their homes or workers in their families. Despite such cases, the social world of the foundling home, the abandoners, the wet-nurses and the foster families was fixed firmly in the lower strata of society, among the poor.

#### Conclusion

The foundling home emerged as an important support system in a context in which a surplus of children was the rule. It maintained a permanent stock of available children who could be claimed either by their biological relatives or by unrelated families. It allowed a given household to give up a child and retrieve it later and created a wide range of situations in which a family could add children to the household either as full members or as servants and apprentices. The number of children in a household, and their distribution by age and gender, was not just left to chance. In spite of the importance that blood ties could assume, an element of choice, less dependent on the fortunes of child mortality or fertility, allowed families to dispose of a surplus of children to suit their needs. In societies organized in terms of paternal metaphors (Sennett 1980: 51), where masters (be it of servants, apprentices or slaves) were supposed to behave like fathers, children could be assimilated into families even if they did not have the established status of full heirs as is the case in contemporary adoption.

This system required a substantial mobility of children in order to create flexibility in the composition of households: foundlings were transported from the countryside to the town and back again, and they moved from their families of origin into one or more other households, sometimes returning and sometimes not. Alongside the market for the wetnurses of Porto's Casa da Roda, one example of a well-functioning foundling home, there existed a parallel market for private wetnurses. This represents a situation of high circulation of children that made possible the transfer of parental responsibilities and an extra element of choice in the composition of families.

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