

4-30-2016

# Survival of the Lucky: Foundling Children in the Ospedale degli Innocenti

Laura Cernik  
*Hartwick College*, [cernikl@hartwick.edu](mailto:cernikl@hartwick.edu)

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## Recommended Citation

Cernik, Laura. "Survival of the Lucky: Foundling Children in the Ospedale Degli Innocenti." Paper presented at the Phi Alpha Theta Upper New York Regional Conference, Plattsburgh, N.Y., April 30, 2016. [http://digitalcommons.plattsburgh.edu/phi\\_alpha\\_theta/3](http://digitalcommons.plattsburgh.edu/phi_alpha_theta/3).

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Laura Cernik  
PAT Paper 2016

*Survival of the Lucky: Foundling Children in the Ospedale degli Innocenti*

Gregorio Dati, a wealthy merchant of the Florentine silk trade, in his *History of Florence*, claimed that the foundling hospitals of Florence, including the famous Ospedale degli Innocenti, would accept children of either gender and raise them. The boys would receive teaching of a trade and the girls would be married off, “which is a wonderful thing.”<sup>1</sup> What Dati fails to describe is some of the struggles the children faced in society, supposing they lived long enough to reach puberty. The Innocenti<sup>2</sup> was developed because of a social and economic need to house children who ultimately struggled to survive within the institutional walls. The foundling hospitals in Renaissance Florence served a specific purpose and had complex, institutionalized methods for handling the children, who had been given to them.

Studies of Renaissance children and childhood tend to follow one of two models. Louis Haas, in his book, *The Renaissance Man and His Children: Childbirth and Early Childhood in Florence, 1300-1600*, breaks down the two models in his introduction. The older of the two models states that, Renaissance parents did not form attachments to their children because of high infant mortality rates. This lack of attachment caused childhood to be a time of neglect and abuse for pre-modern children. Consequently, children were not seen as anything but miniature adults and childhood was not a distinct stage in the life cycle. Historians then claim that these views of childhood changed somewhere in

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<sup>1</sup> Gregorio Dati, “L’Istoria de Firenze”, as quoted by John Boswell. *The Kindness of Strangers: the Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), Page 425

<sup>2</sup> From here on out the Ospedale degli Innocenti, will be simply called the Innocenti.

seventeenth, eighteenth or nineteenth century; whichever period supports the historian's thesis better.<sup>3</sup> Haas does not support this model of pre-modern children studies, but instead argues for a newer model. He claims the older model falls into our perception of the existence of progress in history but does not represent reality. The newer model claims that Renaissance parents did care for their children and that they had to cope with childhood death as modern people do.<sup>4</sup> It claims Florentines did recognize childhood as a distinct stage of development and that Florentines recognized that this stage required special care and attention.<sup>5</sup> Studies of Renaissance children have to approach these two models when researching, as they frame our basic understanding of the child's importance in the Renaissance Society. From this new argument, and the newer model, a study of the abandoned children of the Renaissance can be viewed in a new light.

There are multiple foundling hospitals in Renaissance Italy that could be studied, but Florence, as is common in Renaissance studies, draws more attention for its meticulous records. Within Florence itself there are multiple foundling hospitals, but one hospital over shadows all the others: the Ospedale degli Innocenti,<sup>6</sup> which has extensive records and, to this day, uses the same admissions records that started in 1445.<sup>7</sup> The Ospedale degli Innocenti, which name translates to the "Hospital of the Innocents," was

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<sup>3</sup> Louis, Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children: Childbirth and Early Childhood in Florence, 1300-1600*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 2

<sup>4</sup> Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, pp. 3

<sup>5</sup> Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, pp. 180

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Terpstra, *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance: Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. 2005), pp. 67-69

<sup>7</sup> Pier Paolo Viazzo, Maira Bortolotto and Andrea Zanotto, "Five Centuries of Foundling History in Florence: Changing Patterns of Abandonment, Care and Morality" *Abandoned Children*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 71

founded by the powerful and prosperous silk workers guild of Florence in 1419.<sup>8</sup> This hospital, they claimed, was meant for children who “against natural law” have been abandoned by their parents and are now “gitiatelli,” literally “castaways.” The guild claimed they were funding the hospital for the good and in the name of the wealthy elites of the city as well as and the Commune of Florence.<sup>9</sup> In comparison to the other foundling homes, which could admit perhaps a hundred children a year<sup>10</sup>, the Innocenti could admit ten times that.<sup>11</sup> While it was “founded” in 1419 the actual hospital was officially inaugurated on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 1445 and the first child was admitted on February 5<sup>th</sup> of that same year.<sup>12</sup>

Servants, friends, relatives and clerics left children at foundling hospitals, or sometimes they were simply left anonymously.<sup>13</sup> The children not handed over directly to officials, and instead left secretly, were left in a basin situated on the right of the front portico, directly beneath a window. There was a nurse assigned to the room inside, by the window, whose job it was to collect the infant when she heard it cry.<sup>14</sup> According to the work of John Boswell, the parents were often known regardless of the anonymous option and their names were recorded, which he believes was a result of the difficulty of concealing pregnancies especially in small towns. The parents or the token left with the children were recorded by officials usually to help determine if the parents reclaiming the child were actually the parents or to keep unsuitable matches from happening. In his

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<sup>8</sup> Viazzo, et al. “Five Centuries of Foundling History in Florence”, pp. 70

<sup>9</sup> Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Documentary Study*, pp. 92-93

<sup>10</sup> Terpstra, *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance*, pp. 67-69

<sup>11</sup> Viazzo, et al. “Five Centuries of Foundling History in Florence”, pp. 76-77

<sup>12</sup> Viazzo, et al. “Five Centuries of Foundling History in Florence”, pp. 70.

<sup>13</sup> Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, pp. pp. 419

<sup>14</sup> Viazzo, et al. “Five Centuries of Foundling History in Florence”, pp. 70

footnote, Boswell reiterates the idea of Richard Texler, that these tokens were representations of hope or assuaging of guilt rather than actual commitments by parents to reclaim their children. Reclamations of children were rare, which may have to do with the fact that parents who collected their children were expected to reimburse the hospital for the expense of their child.<sup>15</sup>

There are some similarities between the children left at foundling hospitals. They were usually un-weaned infants of urban origin. They were typically in good health when they reached the hospital and 60% of the children in the Innocenti were female,<sup>16</sup> which may be because of the expense of providing a female child with a dowry.<sup>17</sup> About half of the children were abandoned because of a social issue, such as war, famine, or poverty, or due to personal tragedy, such as death of parents.<sup>18</sup> Pier Paolo Viazzo and his co-researchers regard illegitimacy as a reason for child abandonment and that these children were “sacrificed for honor.”<sup>19</sup> But Boswell points out that only about half of the children were illegitimate, so to claim that illegitimacy was the cause of abandonment is an oversimplification. While there may have been a stigma against illegitimate children, they were not a rarity in society, as wealthy persons sometimes had illegitimate children and lower classes had illegitimate children or were accustomed to irregular unions. When the Innocenti first opened it appears that about one third of the children left there were the children of slaves.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, pp. 419

<sup>16</sup> Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, pp. 419-420

<sup>17</sup> Viazzo, et al. “Five Centuries of Foundling History in Florence”, pp. 77

<sup>18</sup> Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, pp. 419-420

<sup>19</sup> Viazzo, et al. “Five Centuries of Foundling History in Florence”, pp. 71

<sup>20</sup> Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, pp. 419-420

It was probably safer for the caretaker of the child to abandon it rather than kill it. The story of Monna Francesca illustrates this idea. She was “a most cruel woman and murderess,” and in 1467 became pregnant by a servant on a nearby farm. She concealed her pregnancy from and married Cecco Arrighi, who appears to have suspected something. Francesca gave birth to a healthy boy in March of 1467, and threw her child in the river Anigne, which killed her son. She confessed and Francesca had to ride a donkey through the street of Pistoia with her dead son tied to her neck and was then burnt to death.<sup>21</sup> If burning was the punishment for killing a “creature of God,” as the child was called, then it was much safer for a person to abandon a child than kill it, which would relieve the burden from the caretaker but not cause them to be arrested, as it was perfectly legal.

The Innocenti was opened because there was a higher number of foundlings than what the other hospitals could support. While foundling hospitals were not the only method for leaving children, they did become the most popular after they were built. Before foundling hospitals, children were left in churches, besides roads and trees and other exposed places. Once hospitals began to appear they became the more likely sources for child abandonment. Boswell believes that the advent of foundling hospitals in Italy caused fewer and fewer of people to look for abandoned children in traditional exposure sites, which may have lead to a rise in infant mortality among the exposed. Regardless, the accessibility of foundling hospitals and the idea that children would be safe within caught on rapidly.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Documentary Study*, pp. 146-147

<sup>22</sup> Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, pp. 416

But exactly how safe were these children? The scholars Phillip Gravitt and Richard Trexler, are both of the opinions that mortality rates in the Innocenti in the fifteenth century ranged from twenty-five to sixty percent with the later being the more likely.<sup>23</sup> It is hard to find a clear cause of death for all of these children; certainly disease was probably a factor in their deaths. The next cause would likely involve the practice of wet-nursing. In-house nurses, those that were employed to work within the walls of the Innocenti, often had to nurse several children at one time and so the children might not have been fed enough.<sup>24</sup> Before describing wet nursing practices in the Innocenti, it would be helpful to discuss “typical” Florentine wet-nursing practices. Wet-nurses did more than just feed infants in Renaissance Italy, they served as the primary care givers for the first few years of life.<sup>25</sup> Christiane Klapisch-Zuber’s research on wet nursing reveals, of the 180 examples she used, that over ninety percent of children were sent to a wet-nurse during their first month after birth. It would appear mothers would have nursed their own children until a wet-nurse could have been brought in.<sup>26</sup>

The idea that children were dropped off at a wet-nurse and never saw their parents does not seem to represent reality. It appears parents visited their children when they were at the wet-nurse’s house, either to deliver the nurse’s money or to give supplies to the nurse. It also could be that the nurse came to see them, instead of the parents making the journey. It is possible that the nurse could have brought the child along with them. It also appears, that for special occasions, the child might be brought to the parents for visit, as seen in Luigi Tansilo’s poem “La Balia”. These visit had two purposes, one would be

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<sup>23</sup>Included in a footnote in Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, pp. 421

<sup>24</sup> Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, pp. 422-423

<sup>25</sup> Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, pp. 113

<sup>26</sup> Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, pp. 113-114

to give supplies and money, the other to check on their child's health.<sup>27</sup> The average child would return home at about twenty months, after they had been weaned at about eighteen months. This return was often a bittersweet moment, as the parents seem very happy to welcome their children home, but sometimes the wet-nurse and their family could be saddened by the loss of a child who had been a member of their household for almost two years. An example of emotional attachment from these wet nursing families can be seen in the letter Francesco Datini received from his daughter's wet-nurse in 1385, when he decided to have his six-year old illegitimate daughter, from his slave, comes stay with him. The wet-nurse's husband sent a letter saying that they hoped he would treat her well because "she is fearful and we love her dearly, and therefore we beseech you, be gentle with her." Clearly the letter shows that affection was given to the child regardless of whether or not the child was raised by a nurse or its parents.<sup>28</sup>

The Innocenti also relied on the wet-nursing system common in Florence. In 1466, it had four hundred fifty-six wet-nurses on the payroll. The Innocenti, as well as the other foundling hospitals, put sever pressure on the wet-nursing system. The large request for nurses would make it harder to find wet nurses and employ them as well as constantly driving up the cost for the average citizen.<sup>29</sup> According to Haas, foundlings were at a higher death risk at nurse than normal children, possibly because foundlings came from mothers who were impoverished, enslaved or even diseased, and thus the child might not be as healthy. They also may have gone the hardship of a secret birth, and thus weaker when they arrived at the hospital. The amount of children themselves may have put

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<sup>27</sup> Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, pp. 117-118

<sup>28</sup> Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, pp. 131

<sup>29</sup> Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, pp. 93



pressure on the wet-nursing system in the hospital and led to deaths. It appears that there were not enough nurses to handle the amount of in-house children, which could lead to death from malnutrition. Once children left the hospital to go to an outside nurse, in the country, the mortality rates dropped considerably.<sup>30</sup>

Pier Paolo Viazzo and his research group provided a hard mathematical look at infant mortality in the Innocenti. From their research, it appears the exact rate of mortality tends to vary year to year. When the Innocenti first opened, data suggested a low level of mortality, remarkable so, hence its good reputation as a home for children during the Renaissance. The first few years of data made the foundling hospital look like a benign environment, but this can be misleading. As the decades pass the number of deaths increase. In the early 1460s, mortality rates were lower than five out of every ten children, but by the 1480s, rates exceed eight out of ten children. There was a crisis year in 1479, in which nine out of every ten girls died. These numbers would remain high for the next few centuries. Infant mortality tends to increase with admissions, but there were crisis years, which saw massive declines in the availability of wet-nurses which lead to increase deaths.<sup>31</sup>

Parents of children in the Innocenti could affect the wet-nursing system as Gravitt was surprised to discover when he found that some of the children of the Innocenti had parents that visited the hospital after their children had been placed with wet-nurses. Some of these parents paid wet-nurses themselves or even had the audacity to change wet-nurses without informing the Innocenti. Texler found that parents left notes to the Innocenti telling officials where their child should be placed so that they would be close

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<sup>30</sup> Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, pp. 121

<sup>31</sup> Viazzo, et al. "Five Centuries of Foundling History in Florence", pp. 80-82

to them. Presumably the request for certain locations was so that parents could visit their children.<sup>32</sup> The Innocenti does not seem to have enjoyed the burden of legitimate children, possibly because of the parents. In 1550, Innocenti Officials complained about the burden of caring for legitimate children and requested that the Grand Duke of Tuscany “issue a decree, so as no legitimate child can come into the Hospital.”<sup>33</sup>

Nurses had every incentive to keep the infants alive, both in and outside of work with the Innocenti. It was through the health of the children that they were paid, as such it is incorrect to think that Innocenti nurses purposely killed children, anymore than the average nurse would. Considering the ease in escaping contracts it would not make sense to kill an infant to escape an unwelcomed contract. Scholars of the old model of Renaissance childhood studies may claim that the high number of infant deaths and the lack of intervention are signs of lack of regard for these children. This assumption, however, raises the question of who would have known about the Innocenti deaths. Few people likely knew about the high rate of mortality within the Innocenti. When placed in the hospitals, infants disappeared behind institutional walls where they were out of sight and out of mind.<sup>34</sup>

Those who might have known can be broken down into three groups, the upper class, nurses, and administrators. Boswell has several theories as to why these people may have known about the high mortality rates. He believed the upper class, which received appeals for support from the Innocenti and who had its member staff drawn from them might have known. The next group, the nurses, might have known, but it is

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<sup>32</sup> Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, pp. 118

<sup>33</sup> Viazzo, et al. “Five Centuries of Foundling History in Florence”, pp. 79

<sup>34</sup> Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, pp. 423

possible that they only saw their charges and did not know about others. If the nurses had knowledge of the mortality rates it is possible they would have been frightened to speak out against system that supported themselves and their families. The Innocenti administrator would have known, but there was always the chance that they were not diligent enough to see the problem. It is also possible that the administration wished to protect themselves from public wrath, or even that they thought this mortality rate was just the natural way and that infants often die. Boswell, based on the account of the friar Salimbene, also claimed that the administrator and nurses could have contributed to the mortality, thinking it better to just let the infants die rather than try and bear their cost. Regardless of the various reasons, the most important thing to note is that the lower class, which sent their children to the Innocenti more than any other group, probably did not know they were giving their children a death sentence.<sup>35</sup>

If the child survived infancy and had not been reclaimed, the next step was education, which was comprised of basic information<sup>36</sup>, followed by removing the child from the hospital. Boys were apprenticed as early as possible, so they could leave and begin earning a living.<sup>37</sup> They were specifically bound to local artisans.<sup>38</sup> It was not unheard of for girls to also be apprenticed, such as in the case of the orphan Nannina di Jacopo, who was “apprenticed” to Bernardo di Monticelli for fourteen years. This “apprenticeship” function more as a form of adoption than an actual apprenticeship where she would learn a skill. Monticelli received use of her finances in return for raising her and finding her a husband. According to Terpstra, this form of “apprenticeship” wasn’t

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<sup>35</sup> Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, pp. 424-425

<sup>36</sup> Viazzo, et al. “Five Centuries of Foundling History in Florence”, pp. 74

<sup>37</sup> Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, pp. 420

<sup>38</sup> Viazzo, et al. “Five Centuries of Foundling History in Florence”, pp. 74

all that rare in the case of very young orphaned children.<sup>39</sup> Girls, if of age, were potentially married off and given a modest dowry.<sup>40</sup> The Bolognese developed a method that was later used by other foundling hospitals, including the Innocenti. They used public religious processions as advertisement opportunities with the excuse of pious modesty. In religious processions, the girls were veiled and marched in order of seniority. Men in the crowds could see that the older, marriageable girls were in front, but they could also see girls farther down the line, if they wanted to calculate the years left and wait for one of them.<sup>41</sup>

Sometimes children were “adopted” by childless couples or individuals, but these were not the loving familial groups we would hope to see. Often they were just a means to obtain cheap labor and were used as servants. Many were returned when they were no longer needed. The contracts used in these situation usually only required that the child be fed and clothed but sometimes the contracts specified that the boys were required to be taught a trade or that the girls were required to obtain a dowry.<sup>42</sup> It was actually very challenging in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, to officially adopt children, because legal codes made adoption illegal or difficult. Adding a non-blood relative to a family group and letting them inherit property was seen as theft. These non-blood children were seen as undermining family solidarity and patriarchal authority. There was in fact a ban on allowing adopted and illegitimate children inherit property. There were legal loopholes around this ban, but it was still was a struggle.<sup>43</sup> Since it was hard to

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<sup>39</sup> Terpstra, *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance*, pp. 12

<sup>40</sup> Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, pp. 420

<sup>41</sup> Terpstra, *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance*, pp. 272-273

<sup>42</sup> Gravitt, as footnoted by Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, pp. 420-421

<sup>43</sup> Terpstra, *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance*, pp. 13

adopt children, many people simply took the children in and raised them as their own.<sup>44</sup> These could be children from the streets or the foundling hospitals.<sup>45</sup>

The life of a foundling child was not easy, even if they still had a family outside the walls of the Innocenti. Mortality rates were high, and even if the parents intended to actually reclaim their children, there was a good chance these children would be dead. Death seems mostly likely caused by disease and malnutrition and it appears that the public did not know about it. Even if the child survived there was the good possibility that, through Innocenti contracts, they would be farmed out for cheap labor. This paper will not try to refute that these children were not abused and that they did not suffer. However the abuse was not the Innocenti's purpose, they were suppose to provide a home for unwanted children but their lack of resources and the ways they tried to fix this problem lead to the death and abuse of many children. There were too many children for them to take care of and the structures and functions of the Innocenti did not fix the problem, but added to it. Even if the children were abused, it was not the intent of the Innocenti and the idea of it and Renaissance childhood as being purposely abusive has been discredited by newer scholarship.

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<sup>44</sup> Terpstra, *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance*, pp. 14

<sup>45</sup> Haas, *The Renaissance Man and His Children*, pp. 23

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