

Mosaic Motherhood: An Exploration of the Diverse Evidence for Non-elite Roman Mothers

Women in Roman Italy, whose statuses and roles comprised the full range of the Roman social structure, based their identities on mothering. Then as now, social status, local and personal concerns, and the changing landscape of the political and social order complicated marital and maternal roles. Women like Cornelia Gracchus, Agrippina the Elder, and Antonia the Younger were the faces of ideal, elite motherhood. However, since the ancient sources rarely preserved information on women who were not connected to political leaders, it has proven difficult to draw information about non-elite mothers in Roman Italy directly from the available sources. Consequently, scholarship has seldom addressed whether or how elite values translated to the non-elite populations of Roman mothers, who far outnumbered those at the very top of the social ladder. Nevertheless, Roman mothers were undeniably active contributors to Roman society, the quintessential examples of social drivers whose historical voices have been muted by the noise of political activity.

In order to develop a history of how mothers from a variety of social locations assumed their roles and shaped Roman society in Italy, it is essential to carefully and innovatively evaluate a wide range of evidence. Excellent work outlining the possibilities for mothering in Rome has been accomplished by scholars like Suzanne Dixon (Dixon, 1988), while others have demonstrated the range of evidence and evaluative perspectives that can be employed (Gardner, 1986; McAuley, 2016; Saller, 1994). As part of a larger project on the subject, this paper will demonstrate how diverse sources can be used together to create a mosaic depicting the many ways in which Roman women mothered. Among the forms of evidence I will evaluate are funerary monuments, votive offerings, demographic evidence, household objects, literature,

histories, and inscriptions. I hope that this paper and larger work will contribute to the field by drawing together seemingly disparate evidence to reveal the mostly hidden influences of Roman mothers.

Bibliography

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