

The Power of the Breast: The Influence of the Roman Wet Nurse

The wet nurse, called a *nutrix* in Latin, was a common figure in Roman society during the central part of its history (the second century BCE through the second century CE). She was typically either a free woman coming from the lower levels of society working for a wage or an enslaved woman coerced into nursing the child(ren) of her master. The present paper will focus on the latter category of wet nurses because their enslaved status set them apart from their free counterparts. Unlike their free counterparts, these wet nurses could not voluntarily enter into contracts for their services, be paid, choose their employer or nursling. Because they were slaves, these women had little bodily autonomy and their labor was coerced. Yet, enslaved wet nurses in elite households held a measure of influence over their nurslings which was unique and recognized in Roman literature, epitaphs, papyri, and law. This paper will argue that within the elite slaveholding households of the Roman Empire, the wet nurse was the most influential slave in a child's life. This is what I call the power of the breast.

This influence manifested itself in the critical role wet nurses played in sustaining their nurslings when their mothers were faced with physical or sociological constraints. Concurrently, it manifested itself in the stereotypical portrayals of wet nurses in Roman literature as either good or bad figures influencing the lives of their charges. These stereotypical portrayals can be understood in light of the more nuanced evidence provided by the analysis of inscriptions left behind by wet nurses for their nurslings which demonstrate how they themselves conceived of their relationships with and influence over their charges. Finally, the Roman legal system built in provisions for an elite wet nurse to safeguard the wellbeing of her charge in ways equal to that of some of the nursling's closest family members. This provision highlights the status attained by the

Roman wet nurse to appear before a Roman prefect to bring charges against their legal guardian if she felt it was necessary to protect her nursling. Roman law offered a unique status to the wet nurse regarding her potential for early manumission due to her crucial role in the survival and development of her nursling into adulthood. Out of hundreds of slave types in Roman society only three were eligible for early manumission and the wet nurse was one of them.

The influence of the wet nurse in elite Roman households was deeply engrained into Roman culture. She was crucial to the survival of a newborn baby because she provided something the mother of the nursling either could not or sociologically would not provide. Until a child was weaned around two years of age. The wet nurse was the only person who could feed them and keep them alive. Yet, there is evidence that in many cases the wet nurse stayed on to rear their charge past the age of weaning as a nanny. Crucially, a wet nurse stepped in upon the mother's death, illness, or cessation of milk production. She was the first person the child observed speaking which likely aided in the child's developing language skills.

From deeply entrenched literary stereotypes, to epigraphic typologies, papyrus contracts, to legal conventions, the influence of the wet nurse can be seen in a variety of source types from the central period of Roman history. She was the subject of both praise and distain in Roman society. Her influence was both strongly celebrated and just as strongly decried by elite male literary authors of the time. On the one hand, wet nurses were celebrated for their loyalty and affection to their charges while on the other hand they were decried for their potential to neglect or harm their charges. Handing over one's child to another was an act of trust and a placement of responsibility. The literary *topoi* that developed around wet nurses can be attributed to the anxiety generated by placing such a sensitive task in the hands of slave women, often one of

foreign birth. By delegating the care of their children to their social inferiors, Roman parents took a calculated risk.

Bibliography

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