Motherhood(s) in Religions: The Religionification of Motherhood and Mothers' Appropriation of Religion

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Kourotrophia and “Mothering” Figures: Conceiving and Raising an Infant as a Collective Process in the Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Worlds. Some Religious Evidences in Narratives and Art

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Abstract: The paper deals with significantly different sources and historical periods: the parts dedicated to breastfeeding are based on votive statuettes of adults with infant/s from ancient Latium and Southern Etruria; the ones on pregnancy and childbirth are based on two archeological sources – one from Southern Etruria and one from Imperial Rome – which show the male (divine) appropriation of exclusively female biological functions; The parts on mothering are based on the concept of “mothering figures” (male mothering, animal mothering...) through mythological examples from Greek, Etruscan, and Roman art and narratives. Despite the heterogeneous documentation, we may conclude that the mother was not the only active character in the process of conceiving, giving birth, breastfeeding, and raising an infant in the Greek, Etruscan, and Roman societies. Many other figures close to the mother – male and female – were engaged in obtaining divine protection for her and her child; in helping, supporting, and even substituting her when necessary (and, of course, when possible). The research has been conducted mainly by using the concept of *kourotrophia* and mothering figures as analytical tools.

Keywords: Breastfeeding, child-care, childbirth, Greek, Roman and Etruscan religion, votives, ancient family

1 Introduction

This paper aims to explore themes such as gender fluidity and alternative mothering in the Greek, Etruscan, and Roman worlds from a religious point of view.¹ It deals with significantly different sources and historical

¹ This article collects the results of the three papers I presented on the occasion of the three International Workshops which were part of the cycle *Religionification of Motherhood and Mothers' Appropriation of Religion* that I co-organized at the Max-Weber-Kolleg of the University of Erfurt. The first workshop was entitled *Breastfeeding(s) and Religions: Normative Prescriptions and Individual Appropriation. A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Antiquity to the Present*, held at the Max-Weber-Kolleg (University of Erfurt) on July 11-12, 2018. (Co-organizer: Olivera Koprivica; proceedings published as Pedrucci, “Breastfeeding(s) and Religions”. See esp. Pedrucci, “Breastfeeding ‘in Couple’.”) The second one was entitled *Pregnancies, Childbirths, and Religions: Rituals, Normative Perspectives, and Individual Appropriations. A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Perspective from Antiquity to the Present* held at the Max-Weber-Kolleg (University of Erfurt), January 31 - February 1, 2019

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periods: the first one on breastfeeding is based on votive statuettes of adults with infant/s from ancient Latium and Southern Etruria; the second one on pregnancy and childbirth is based on two archaeological sources – one from Southern Etruria and one from Imperial Rome – which shows the male (divine) appropriation of exclusively female biological functions; the third one on mothering is based on the concept of “mothering figures” (male mothering, animal mothering...) through mythological examples from Greek, Etruscan, and Roman art and narratives. Despite the heterogeneous documentation, the *fil rouge* is: the mother was not the only active character in the process of conceiving, giving birth, breastfeeding, and raising an infant in the Greek, Etruscan, and Roman societies. Many other figures close to the mother – male and female – were engaged in obtaining divine protection for her and her child; in helping, supporting, and even substituting her when necessary (and, of course, when possible). The research has been conducted mainly by using the concept of *kourotrophia* and mothering figures as analytical tools. I must warn that there isn’t a proper balance between the three sections, since the first one required an introduction to breastfeeding in Antiquity and a detailed description of the archaeological material (which is significantly more copious than the material used in the other case studies).²

1.1 *Kourotrophia*

Kourotrophia is made up of the verb *trepho*, whose first meaning is “to cause to grow”, and subsequently “increase, bring up, rear”; and *kouros*, young boy. Therefore, *kourotrophia* means “making a child grow”.³ It represents the main way for “major” goddesses to express their mothering towards someone else’s offspring – whether divine, not fully divine, or human – in helping and protecting them from the womb to adulthood.⁴ All female deities – and also some male deities – engage in some form of *kourotrophia*. Interestingly, among goddesses who are more significantly involved in “making a child grow” into physical well-being and social acceptability, we find the two female virgin goddesses *par excellence*: Artemis and Athena. *Kourotrophia* is the main way for female goddesses to express their mothering, and it has nothing to do with biology.

Kourotrophia is also a human action. All the members of the household take part in this process with different roles (possibly also some neighbors).⁵ In doing so, they are flanked by a variety of deities, as I have already pointed out. Evidently, religious practices play a crucial role in the process, from rites of passage to apotropaic rituals. It is obviously a Greek word, but the same idea also exists in the Roman and Etruscan cultures as well. Indeed, aspects concerning fertility and the preservation of children are at the core of numerous cults in ancient Greece, Etruria, and Rome.⁶

1.2 “Mothering” figures

First of all, it is necessary to define the word “mother” itself. The definition I will use is based on Sara Ruddick’s articulation of the three demands of maternal thinking – preservation, growth, and social

(Co-organizer: Claudia D. Bergmann; proceedings will be published in Pedrucci, “Pregnancies, Childbirths”, see esp. Pedrucci, “Not of woman Born”.) The third workshop was entitled *Mothering(s) and Religions: Normative Perspectives and Individual Appropriations. A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Approach from Antiquity to the Present*, held at the Max-Weber-Kolleg (University of Erfurt), 16-17 July 2019. (Co-organizer: Emiliano R. Urciuoli; proceedings will be published in Pedrucci, “Mothering(s) and Religions”. On this occasion, I presented a paper with Florence Pasche Guignard entitled *Multiple Male Mothers? Representations of “Alternative Mothering” in the Ancient Greek and Roman Worlds*. It will be published separately).

² Moreover, the second and third sections are selected portions of longer chapters – those that can be related to gender fluidity and alternative mothering; while the first section reproduces a significant part of the chapter Pedrucci, “Breastfeeding ‘in Couple’”.

³ Demont, “Remarques”.

⁴ See for instance: Pedrucci, “Le maternità”; Pedrucci, “Motherhood”; Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamenti”; Pedrucci, Scapini, “Il ruolo”; Pasche Guignard, Pedrucci, “Motherhood/s”.

⁵ Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamenti”, 1-11; Bremmer, “The Greek Birth”.

⁶ Cf. *infra*.

acceptance — that are met by the three practices of preservative love, nurturance, and training.⁷ Preservation has to be understood as the most compelling demand. As Ruddick suggests, “mother” is better understood as a verb (to mother) rather than as a feminine substantive. A “mother” is anyone who engages in maternal practice and makes this a central part of their life. Mother can, thus, be gender-inclusive.⁸

Inspired by Ruddick’s words, the epistemological framework and definition of “mother” reads as follows: any child can have in their life one or more figures who collaborate (simultaneously or not) in pursuing preservation, growth, and social acceptance, but usually every child has in their life a figure – a “mother” – who takes care of them on a daily – or almost daily – basis in order to pursue their preservation, growth, and social acceptance. Significant others can help this figure, but she/he performs this task in a preponderant way in comparison to others. This figure is often, but not always and not necessarily, the biological mother.⁹

Therefore, *kourotrophia* – which encompasses Ruddick’s three demands: preservation, growth, and social acceptance – implies one main figure, which is the mother – often but not always the biological mother – and other figures who engage in maternal practice, who play a mothering role in the raising of children without “technically” being the mother (e.g., aunts, elder sisters, grandmothers, step-mothers, as well as other relatives and people close to the household) in order to help, support, if necessary and feasible, substitute the mother – on a regular basis or in exceptional situations with variable duration. I have called them “mothering figures”.¹⁰

I will offer two concrete renowned examples from Greek and Roman lore to clarify these concepts.

Dionysus, as we will see in greater details below, has a biological mother, a “mother” in the sense mentioned above, and many mothering figures (including a man).

Dionysus has a biological mother, Semele, who died before giving birth. Such a thing cannot happen to human infants;¹¹ but many grew up without their biological mother, who died in childbirth. In these cases, the “mother” was, out of necessity, not the biological mothers. Like in the case of Dionysus, one of the most suitable candidates for this role was the maternal aunt: Ino, in his case. During his infancy, many other figures – mothering figures –, especially nymphs, played a role in “making him grow”. One of them is Silenus, a male deity.

⁷ Ruddick, “Maternal”, 17.

⁸ I quote here the reason for not choosing “parent” from Pasche Guignard, Pedrucci, “Motherhood/s”, 409f.: “Several reasons lead us to choose ‘mother’ over ‘parent’ [...] etymologically, ‘parent’ derives from *parēre* [...]. Though etymologists suggest other ancient meanings for this verb, ‘*enfanter*, *mettre au monde* [...] est le sens usuel et Classique’ and by far the most widespread. One of our aims is precisely to avoid further reducing ‘the maternal’ to the biological act of giving birth. Beyond childbirth itself, if the term ‘parent,’ in English, may *seem* more ‘inclusive,’ it certainly is not constructed as genderless. Even though care work and nurture are not *essentially* gendered activities, such work was and in many contexts still is predominantly attributed to and performed by women, many of whom are mothers. They are considered (and often too named) primarily in their maternal role rather than as generic ‘parent.’”

⁹ This is the definition that I have elaborated on the occasion of the Workshop, *Mothering(s) and Religions: Normative Perspectives and Individual Appropriations. A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Approach from Antiquity to the Present*.

¹⁰ Previously, for my project as Cofund Marie Curie Fellow at the University of Erfurt, *Mothering and (Wet)Nursing: A Metadisciplinary Study on Parenting Strategies in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (“MaMA:” *Mothers and Mother-like Figures in Antiquity*), I used “mother-like figures”. Then, I realized that they do not simply “resemble” the mother in performing the maternal work, but they do mother at her place. “Vicarious figures” can be another option, even though, the mother is not necessarily absent, see Pedrucci, Scapini, “Il ruolo”; Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamento”, 70f. Co-mothering is possible. On the occasion of the workshop, Pasche Guignard and I opted for “othermothering”/ “alternative mothering”. Stanlie James defines othermothering as “the acceptance of responsibility for a child not one’s own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal” (James, “Mothering”, 45), though without necessarily being equivalent to legalized adoption. This concept also encompasses that of “community mothers” who take care of one or several children in a community. However, since “othermothering” is only used to describe the African American communities, we decided to use “alternative mothering”, instead. Nevertheless, to me “alternative” has the same problem as “vicarious”: the mother and the mothering figure/s can be present at the same time (even if likely taking care of different things). In any case, if we consider “othermothering”, we should as well consider “othermotherhood” (see Rich, “Of Woman”).

¹¹ Unless we consider children, who were born with a caesarian section, as born from a dead woman. In fact, until the 16th century caesarian section was performed only on dead women. Indeed, the birth of Dionysus can be considered as a mythological representation of a caesarian birth. However, there is no strong evidence to argue that caesarian sections were really performed in Greek and Roman time, according to Gourevitch, “Chirurgie”. Cf. Pedrucci, “Not of Woman Born”.

Romulus and Remus have a biological mother, the vestal Rhea Silvia. They were exposed; therefore, they were not raised by their biological mother. The circumstances of their exposure were obviously out of ordinary, but the abandonment of infants in antiquity was not rare. Subsequently, the twins had a temporary animal mother, and, then, a human mother, Acca Larentia, who will “make them grow”.

2 The Protection of Breastmilk as a “Couple Issue” in Ancient Latium and Southern Etruria

Breastfeeding is an exclusively female function, like pregnancy and childbirth. However, differently from pregnancy and childbirth, it can be performed also by non-biological mothers (of the infant in need of breastmilk. In mythological narratives and, maybe, also in real lives, even by “animal mothers”).¹² Mercenary breastfeeding is well attested until the invention of milk formula; in some cases, even beyond. I do not want to discuss whether or not Greek, Etruscan, and Roman mothers used to breastfeed their own children or preferred to hire a wet-nurse for this purpose. Undoubtedly, the mother/family choice depended on social norms and personal beliefs: both significantly change over time and space and from one individual to another. What I suggest is that co-breastfeeding (between mother, wet-nurse, and, potentially, other women, like neighbours or maybe also grandmothers, considering the typically early age of bearing a first child)¹³ was commonly practiced in all circumstances in which milk formula was not available. Why do I believe so? The answer is perhaps even too obvious: because children’s lives in antiquity depended on the availability of human milk for quite an extensive period. On the one hand, premature weaning and the usage of animal milk were considered very dangerous for the infant;¹⁴ on the other, many accidents could happen to the mother (or to the wet-nurse/s) to prevent or reduce lactation: illnesses, hypogalactia or agalactia, exhaustion, new pregnancy, or temporary (or, not so rarely, definitive) absence.¹⁵

The importance of breastmilk for the infant’s survival explains the abundance of votive terracotta of breastfeeding women in ancient Italy.¹⁶ Usually, these ex-voto represent one woman with one infant – of variable ages, some of them look significantly big – at her breast. Based on my previous reflections, these votive objects could represent not only and not necessarily the mother and the baby and could be offered to ask and to thank for divine help not only and not necessarily by the mother of the baby. The wet-nurse, above all, as mothering figure may need divine assistance for breastfeeding issues (it is worth noticing: not only out of altruism or affection, but also for personal interest).

Among this votive assemblage, there are two typologies which are only present in ancient Latium and Etruria: the couple of a man and a breastfeeding woman (*kourotrophoi* with a male figure) and the couple of two breastfeeding women (double *kourotrophoi*). These typologies show that breastfeeding could be a “sharable” and not so hidden action, even in front of the gods.¹⁷

¹² Pedrucci, “Breastfeeding Animals”.

¹³ Women’s lives were much less confined to the domestic space than is usually believed, both in Greece and in Rome; see Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamenti”, 25-118, 164-165; Bremmer, “The Greek Birth”.

¹⁴ Garnsey, “Child”; Kwok, Keenleyside, “Stable”; Pedrucci, “Sangue”.

¹⁵ See also in cases of divorce. Even tougher, the law (in particular the age of automatic paternal custody) changes over time, and it was different for boys and girls; in cases of divorce the offspring generally remained with the father. See Dixon, “The Roman”, XVI; Laes, “Children”, 46-47.

¹⁶ Not so many in Greece, indeed. See, e.g., Hadzisteliou Price, “Kourotrophos”; Bonfante, “Nursing”; Ducaté-Paarmann, “Images”; Pedrucci, *L’isola*.

¹⁷ This Paragraph is a reduced version of Pedrucci, “Breastfeeding ‘in Couple’”. My assertions about mothering and breastfeeding are the results of long-lasting research I started with my PhD based on the analysis of written (primary and secondary) and iconographical sources in a comparative *Longue durée* perspective. For the sake of brevity, I cannot quote all the sources and the methodological approach to them here, but I will mention in footnotes where they can be found.

2.1 Presentation of the Archaeological Material

The archeological site with the largest number of *kourotrophoi* with a male figure is Satricum. They come from the votive deposit III of the Sanctuary of Mater Matuta, held today at Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia in Rome. They date from the end of the 4th–3rd century BCE.¹⁸ According to Alessandro Della Seta,¹⁹ they all represent the same subject: enthroned male, female and child, all beneath the same mantle; the female offering her left breast to the baby.²⁰

Another *kourotrophos* with a male figure comes from Gabii, from the sanctuary of Juno, votive deposit 1 (Fig. 1). It generically dates – like all the votive assemblage – from the beginning of the 2nd century BCE. The statuette represents an enthroned male, female and child beneath the same mantle. The head of the naked baby is missing, but its position, lying down on the left arm of the woman and reaching for the female breast with its right hand, is typical of *kourotrophos*’ images. The man has his left arm on the woman’s shoulders whilst he holds a *patera* in the other hand.²¹

Figure 1. Gabii. From Almagro-Gorbea, “El santuario”, 271, n. 10, Tav. LI 1.

Another votive from Gabii (Fig. 2), in which the baby is held reclined in the woman’s left arm with its face very close to the breast, might be considered as a *kourotrophos* with a male figure due to the particular position of the child, since usually in statuettes of a male, female and child, the latter is represented frontally, on the female’s knees. In this case, the male and female figures are extremely close to each other; in fact, she is almost in three quarter profile. The man has his left arm on the woman’s shoulders. They are beneath the same mantle and – most likely – they both hold a *patera*.²²

¹⁸ Fridh-Haneson, “Le manteau”, 17, states that around 60 exemplars of couples with or without a child, with or without a mantel that cover both the male and female, are present in Villa Giulia Museum and its deposits (44 entire statuettes + fragments). From Votive Deposit III (4th–2nd century BCE). They are made of coarse red local clay; cheap artifacts. The votive terracotta of a couple seated beneath the same mantle originates almost without exception from Italy and to a large extent from Rome and its immediate surroundings and dates from the 4th to the 2nd century BCE. According to her, they belong to the chthonic sphere and represent the mythological rebirth which awaited those initiated into the Orphic religion. The interpretation of the child in the woman’s lap therefore acquires a wider significance as it can be applied to other votive material depicting the subject of a woman and child. Other exemplars come from the Esquiline Hill, the Tiber, Gabii, Ardea, and Lavinium.

¹⁹ Della Seta, “Museo”, 233–320.

²⁰ Della Seta gives the following inv. n.: 11193, 11210, 11211, 11219. The correct inv. n. are: 11193, 11211, 11213, 11214, 11215 (from Villa Giulia’s inventory ledgers).

²¹ Almagro-Gorbea, “El santuario”, 271, n. 10, Tav. LI 1. No inv. n.

²² Ibid., 273, n. 19, Tab. LIII 2. No inv. n.

Figure 2. Gabii. From Almagro-Gorbea, “El santuario”, 273, n. 19, Tab. LIII 2.

Following the same reasoning, at least three more statuettes from Gabii of couples with a child who is not seated frontally on the female’s knees, but reclined in her arms, might be understood as *kourotrophoi* with a male figure.²³

One of them (Fig. 3),²⁴ in particular, is very similar to a statuette from Veii Portonaccio, which represents an enthroned male, female and child beneath the same mantle. The baby is very young, plump and completely naked. It is lying in the woman’s arms in a quite unusual, but somehow realistic position: it is in three-quarter profile, kicking and grabbing the right breast of the woman. The man has his left arm on the woman’s shoulders whilst he holds a *patera* in the other hand (Fig. 4).²⁵

Figure 3. Gabii. From Almagro-Gorbea, “El santuario”, 271, n. 11, Tab. LI 2.

²³ Almagro-Gorbea, “El santuario”, 271, n. 8 and 9, Tab. L 3, 4, inv. n. 65/57 and 65/2. With the same inv. n. (65/2), there is a similar but not at all identical statuette in *Enea nel Lazio*, A99. In n. 12, Tab. LI 3, the figure is more likely a dove, not a baby, according to a specific typology of this area.

²⁴ Almagro-Gorbea, “El santuario”, 271, n. 11, Tab. LI 2. Inv. n. 65/62.

²⁵ Fridh-Haneson, “Le manteau”, 43-44, Figs. 46-47. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, inv. n. 2563 (from a consumed mould). According to the scholar, it is supposed to be similar to the statuette from the Tiber, today at the Museo Nazionale Romano inv. 14952, but it is too ruined to clearly recognize the baby and its posture.

Figure 4. Veii Portonaccio. From Fridh-Haneson, “Le manteau”, 43, Pl. XII, Fig. 46.

From Veii Campetti we have two further, unpublished, *kourotrophoi* with a male figure. They are both at the Villa Giulia Museum and likely date 4th century BCE. In the first one (Fig. 5, inv. n. 2498), the baby is similar to the one in Fig. 4. It is lying in the woman's arms; its face is very close to her left breast and it reaches the woman's right breast with its right arm. The man puts his left arm on the woman's shoulders and holds a *patera* in the other hand. They likely wear a diadem; she wears a necklace. The other one (Fig. 6, inv. n. inv. 2458, previously VTP 607) shows a baby lying in the woman's left arm; its face is very close to her left breast and it is covered by her mantle. She wears a necklace; he holds a *patera* in the right hand. They both wear a mantle, even though the two mantles seem to be unified.

Figure 5. Veii Campetti. © MiBAC. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia. Foto Mauro Benedetti. From Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamento”.

Figure 6. Veii Campetti. © MiBAC. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia. Foto Mauro Benedetti. From Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamento”.

One more statuette (possibly two) from Rome (from the so-called votive deposit of Minerva Medica)²⁶ is very interesting (Fig. 7). It represents an enthroned male, female and child likely beneath the same mantle (heads are missing). Likely, the man has his left arm on the woman's shoulders and he holds a *patera* in the other hand. Feet are on a footrest. The position of the baby is quite unusual: it is seated in the woman's lap in three quarter profile. Even if it is almost frontal, it lifts its right hand to grab the breast and indeed seems to squeeze the nipple.²⁷

Figure 7. Rome (?) From Fridh-Haneson, “Le manteau”, 47, Fig. 54.

One extremely interesting votive statuette comes from the Sanctuary of La Vignaccia (Caere, today Cerveteri) in Northern Latium (Fig. 8).²⁸ It is a *unicum*: it represents two women, each suckling a baby, with an older child respectively on the left and right sides. Both women wear the chiton and the himation, which cover their heads. They have necklaces with pendants and a diadem. Each woman's right hand rests on her right leg, while the babies are held in the left arm, likely being suckled with the left breast. The babies are

²⁶ Recently, scholars have identified the shrine linked with this deposit with the temple of *Fortuna Virgo*. See *infra*.

²⁷ Fridh-Haneson, “Le manteau”, 47, Fig. 54. Antiquarium Comunale Roma, inv. n. 5579. She lists another from the same consumed mould, Antiquarium Comunale Roma, inv. n. 6150.

²⁸ See Nagy, “Votive”, 234-235, Fig. 240; Ducaté-Paarmann, “Deux femmes”, 848-849.

partially covered by the *himation*. On the left and right side of the throne respectively, there is a standing, frontal, dressed child. One has a round object in the right hand, the other an indeterminate object in the left hand.²⁹ Like in many votives representing *kourotrophoi*, the babies touch the right breast of the women. It dates from the end of the 4th–3rd century BCE.

Figure 8. Caere. From Nagy, “Votive”, 234f., Fig. 240.

The two female figures are similar but not perfectly identical. Considering the hieratic position and the rich *parure*, they could be the doubling of a goddess; acolytes on the side are quite common in near Eastern representations. Nevertheless, the idea of showing two women breastfeeding together with older children around them is extremely interesting; as is the fact that someone (man or woman) used the votive to ask something from a deity, to thank a deity, to communicate with a deity and with other human beings and/or convey a message to some extent connected with breastfeeding. One might expect to see such a scene (two breastfeeding women and older children around them) – which was likely very frequent and ordinary in antiquity – relatively often in artefacts, but, on the contrary, I cannot mention a single parallel.

The last set of evidences that might suggest breastfeeding “in couple” is represented by some statuettes of a woman with a man who grabs her breasts with one hand, while embracing her with the other arm. We have fifteen exemplars: ten from Satricum, one from Caere, two from Caere La Vignaccia, one from Veii Portonaccio, two of unknown origin (one possibly from Civita Castellana). I will not analyse them in detail here,³⁰ since the allusion to breastfeeding in this kind of *ex-voto* is clearly not unquestionable. It might refer to breastfeeding, for an already born child or for a child who will hopefully be born soon, but also to sexual desire and (implicitly?) procreation in a more general way. Nevertheless, three statuettes from Satricum might confirm our assumption that they represent a couple with one or two infants, in which he grabs her breast (Figs. 9, 10).³¹ She holds a *patera* and wears a necklace. It is worth noting that the common mantle covers the children, too. The children, moreover, hold something in their arms, which could be a doll.

²⁹ Berkeley Phoebe Hearst Museum, inv. n. 8.2401. There are only two possible parallels with two identical women who each hold an infant in their arms but do not breastfeed, see Gnade 2007, 158-159, n. 387; and a statuette from the sanctuary of Diana to Nemi, see Ducaté-Paarmann, “Deux femmes”, 849-850. For the image, see <https://nemitonottingham.wordpress.com/2013/06/18/1053/> (last accessed 4 September 2018).

³⁰ See Pedrucci, “Breastfeeding ‘in Couple’”.

³¹ See Della Seta, “Museo”, 306. Inv. n. 11181; Gnade, “Satricum”, 158f., n. 386: sanctuary of Mater Matuta, votive deposit III (excavation 1985), inv. n. T702 and T196. End 4th-3rd century BCE. *Errata corrige*: for a mistake, Fig. 10 was mentioned as Fig. 15 in Pedrucci, “Breastfeeding ‘in Couple’”, but it was not published there.

Figure 9. Satricum. © MiBAC. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia. Foto Mauro Benedetti. From Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamento”.

Figure 10. Satricum. From Gnade, “Satricum”, 158f., n. 386.

2.2 Possible Interpretations of the Data

The function I want to investigate is the performing of religious practices which involved the offering of votives representing adults with infants. Thus, the main variable – concerning the agents – is mothering; other variables are biological link, social status and cultural traditions; then, place of provenance (urban and non-urban spaces);

public or private spheres; kind of deities and, if applicable, rituals performed to honour them; and other kinds of votives. I will briefly summarise the information we can gain from the available data.³²

Biological link: a biological link among the adults and between the adults and the infant/s is highly likely. In the case of single *kourotrophoi*, the female figure could potentially be any of the female figures, to some extent related to the baby, who can breastfeed: care-givers inside the household, a relative or even a particularly close neighbour. Certainly, the wet-nurse *in primis*, but technically also a grand-mother, an aunt, an elder sister. But in the case of the couple of a breastfeeding female and a male, the focus is on the nuclear family. The case of two breastfeeding women is a special one, and it will be discussed separately.

Social status and cultural aspects: among the votives of women and couples with infants, the exemplars taken under consideration are all of fine quality. The double *kourotrophoi* is a luxury product. The moulds are generally consumed, but not so consumed as many other votives of similar kinds. Therefore, I would assume that they were likely made to satisfy an élite clientele and their usage was frequent.³³

Within the Roman household, moreover, the evidence seems to suggest that the mother and the father were both engaged in the childhood of the offspring, and that the mother was helped in taking care of the offspring by female relatives and other figures inside the household.³⁴ M. Cornelius Statius’s sarcophagus – just to mention the most striking and renowned example – shows the father’s caring interest and control in breastfeeding activities (2nd century CE).³⁵ The situation was likely more or less the same in Etruria, with the difference that in Etruria the woman had more freedom and independence: for instance, she took part alongside her husband in different aspects of public life, such as banquets, shows and ceremonies and she could decide on her property. The maternal lineage was very important, too: in fact, we can find a quite frequent use of the matronymic.³⁶

Nevertheless, this does not mean that women in the historical context were are taking onto consideration enjoyed a high degree of freedom in everyday life or that they were considered at the same level of men. During the 1st century CE, Gaius Musonius Rufus, a Stoic philosopher who was born in Volsinii, depicted the model of the wise woman, wife, and mother in the following way: “So it is that such a woman is likely to be energetic, strong to endure pain, prepared to nourish her children at her own breast, and to serve her husband with her own hands, and willing to do things which some would consider no better than slaves’ work. Would not such a woman be a great help to the man who married her, an ornament to her relatives, and a good example for all who know her?” (*Dial.*, 3.11-12).³⁷ At least at the beginning of the Roman Empire, this was the ideal woman for a citizen who was born in Etruria.

Place of provenance (urban and non-urban spaces):³⁸ an *ex-voto*, which shows or might allude to breastfeeding within a couple context (male and female or two females) is typical of ancient Latium and Southern Etruria. In general, votives depicting a couple (in some cases, even more so than two adults) with child are typical of this area.

³² For more details, see Pedrucci, “Breastfeeding ‘in couple’”.

³³ In this regard, Gliniser, “Reconsidering”, 27-30, argues that, in general, terracotta votives were not intended for poor people, even when they seem to us low-quality artifacts.

³⁴ See Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamenti”, 25-118.

³⁵ See for instance Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamenti”, 42, fig. 3. For the commission of this kind of images in a public, funerary context, see *infra*.

³⁶ Bonfante, “Mothers”; Bonfante, “Motherhood”; Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamento”. According to Pitzalis, “Madri”, 171-175, during the Orientalising Period, at the dawn of Etruscan civilisation, the role of mother was compatible with the eventual assumption of religious responsibilities. This might suggest that the mother had a prominent role beside the husband and that they acted together for the welfare of the offspring. Starting from the 4th century BCE, the importance of being a mother seems to be confirmed in the decoration of mirrors.

³⁷ Translated by Cora E. Lutz, London and Oxford 1946, available on-line https://sites.google.com/site/thestoiclif/the_teachers/musonius-rufus (last access 13 Nov. 2019).

³⁸ I consider “urban” the space inside the city wall (“city” in this context being a built-up area where public and religious buildings are present). For Rome, due to the dating of the material, I consider “urban” the space inside the Servian wall, see *infra*. Sub-urban is outside the city wall, but close to it (in an extremely empirical way: for instance, sub-urban sanctuaries would be located within roughly a walking distance for a healthy adult back and forward in a day without physical effort). That is, easily reachable also for women. Extra-urban is outside the city wall, far enough away from it to not be considered sub-urban. The sanctuaries built in this space are usually to meet the needs of mediation and political control of the territory. See Veronese, “Lo spazio”, 34-35. This does not seem to be our case.

As far as the ancient Latium is concerned, the votives come from sanctuaries inside the urban space. The sanctuary of Mater Matuta is located on the top of the acropolis.³⁹

Concerning Gabii, the urban cult place, the so-called Temple of Juno, stood in the middle of a large, artificially levelled platform, between the forum and the Lago di Castiglione, facing toward the forum, along the via Praenestina.⁴⁰

The case of Rome is unique. The material comes from the so-called deposit of Minerva Medica.⁴¹ When ashlar masonry walls and a Republican votive deposit (datable between the 4th and 2nd century BCE, comprising dedications to Minerva) were found in 1887 south of the former Via Curva/C. Botta, they were immediately attributed to the temple of Minerva Medica, but the deposit has been recently attributed to Fortuna Virgo.⁴²

One further detail could be of interest: the other archaeological spots from which votives representing adult/s with infants were found in the Roman urban territory are the deposits along the Tiber. It is impossible to establish where these votives were used before having been deposited in pits dug along the banks of the Tiber, but they might be related to the Forum Boarium.⁴³ I will return to this shortly.

As far as Etruria is concerned, the sanctuary of Caere La Vignaccia was quite isolated, south-west of the city. The votive deposit was found in a vineyard right outside the city walls. The primary goddesses seem to have been Artemis and Minerva.⁴⁴

The sanctuary of Portonaccio in Veii is located in the western part of the city, just inside the city wall, near to the stream *Fosso Piordo*. The primary goddess was Menerva, associated with Turan and Artimis (Artemis).⁴⁵

39 From the same deposit: 27 statuettes of woman with child (18 *kourophoroi* and 9 *kourotrophoi*) and 13 *kourophoroi* with a male figure. Dating: End of the 4th–3rd century BCE. Moreover: a statue of Mater Matuta (?) with patera, fruit, dove (Della Seta, “Museo”, 303); a pregnant woman (Bouma, “Religio”, I, 270, Fig. 6); enthroned females (Bouma, “Religio”, I, 271); terracotta group of three persons, veiled, the figure on the viewer’s right and perhaps the central figure are females; terracotta group of seven persons, five persons on the left, with bare upper bodies, are male, the second from the right with long hair is female, the one on the right probably another male (father, mother and five sons? Bouma, “Religio”, I, 274); anatomical votives (male and female genitals, breasts), swaddled babies, male and female heads, male and female figures, female figures with fruit, votive cakes, pomegranate, animals (Bouma, “Religio”, I, 241, 275–277); terracotta heads and idols (Volsician plastic art? Bouma, “Religio”, I, 198); an idol with both male and female genitals (Della Seta, “Museo”, 310); Phoenician-Cypriot objects (Bes. See Della Seta, “Museo”, 290–291).

40 From the same deposit: 13 *kourotrophoi* with a male figure; 2 couples (male and female); one very coarse handmade couple (male and female); 1 statuette with three seated, veiled figures (beneath the same mantle); 1 *kourotrophos*. See Almagro-Gorbea, “El santuario”, 2270–273, Tabs. XLIX–LIV. Dating: before the beginning of the 2nd century BCE. Votive material characteristic of the Republican period indicates that the cult place dates back to the 4th–3rd century, perhaps 5th century BCE. The ex-votos of Republican date were recovered at several locations. The find-spots are referred to as *favissa* or *stipe*. They comprise anatomical votives, human figurines, statues, animal statuettes (cattle), some other terracotta artifacts, pottery.

41 From the same deposit: 74 couples (male and female) with an infant; male with patera; male with arm on female’s shoulder; female with arm on male’s shoulder; infant on male’s knees. Gatti Lo Guzzo, “Il deposito”, 21–30. Moreover: 3 *kourotrophoi*; 4 *kourophoroi*. Cataloguing these votives was an arduous task for Gatti Lo Guzzo. All the material from the so-called deposit of Minerva Medica was transferred from Antiquarium Comunale del Celio (closed in 1939) to the deposit of the Musei Capitolini. Many exemplars had lost their inventory numbers during the transfer, and only a few data sheets existed. However, the attribution of the couples with infant is rather certain. The dating is out of necessity made only on stylistic criteria. During the 4th century BCE, the material is influenced by Etruscan art. From the 4th century BCE onwards, the Greek influence is evident. See Gatti Lo Guzzo, “Il deposito”, 18–20, 150–151.

42 Häuber, Schütz, “The sanctuary”, 86. Cf. Häuber, “The eastern”, 100–133. See also *infra* for the Porta Carmentalis.

43 Pensabene, “Terrecotte”, 5–15. 22 couples (male and female) with child, 3 *kourophoroi*. 4th–3rd century BCE. Cf. Bouma, “Religio”, III, 91–92.

44 Nagy, “Votive”, 198–212; Ducatè-Paarmann, “Deux femmes”, 844–847, 856. Around 800 exemplars were found there, the majority linked to maternity and fertility issues. A significant number of female figures were found, but also male figures (armed men, Heracles, Aplu). Dating of the assemblage: end of the 5th–2nd century BCE. From the same site: ten statuettes representing two enthroned women with a child sitting in the middle were found in the same deposit; a statuette with two enthroned women with three children (one in the middle, two on the sides); 19 standing female figures with child (women holding babies in their arms and figures accompanied by somewhat older children who stand by them) and 21 seated female figures with child (some of them *kourotrophoi*); 6 *kourophoroi* with a male figure.

45 Ducatè-Paarmann, “Deux femmes”, 855; Ducatè-Paarmann, “Images”. Two big sectors were excavated, the other one was likely dedicated to Aplu (Apollo). From the same deposit: 124 *kourophoroi*, 25 *kourotrophoi*, 14 + 4 (?) *kourophoros* and 1 *kourotrophos* with a male figure. Moreover: anatomical ex-voto (feet, legs, breasts), swaddled babies, seated infants. They are mostly unpublished. Dating: 4th–3rd century BCE.

The other sanctuary of Veii, Campetti, is extremely relevant. It is located north-west of the city, 200 meters from the *Formello* gate. The only inscription from the sanctuary mentions Ceres in Latin, likely Vei for the Etruscans (3rd century BCE).⁴⁶ Here a mass production is attested (up to 310 exemplars from the same mould),⁴⁷ which likely proves the existence of workshops close to the sanctuary and of a religious business. By contrast, votives from other sites, as I said, seem to prove a relatively large, even though not massive, production of them.

The above-reconstructed framework suggests the performance of rituals which were common and had a relatively open and public dimension. Or, to say it with different words, rituals which are not restricted inside house walls just because they concern private issues, such as breastfeeding.

The last observation leads us to the more strictly religious variables (what kind of deities and, if applicable, the rituals performed to honour them; other kinds of votives), which require a wider discussion.

Concerning the deities, in ancient Latium these types of votives are mostly related to Mater Matuta, Fortuna, and Juno. Mater Matuta is one of the Roman goddesses mainly engaged with *kourotrophia*. At the Forum Boarium, for instance, *kourotrophia* as a whole - from birth to the care of infants, through rites of passage, until the threshold of adulthood - seems to be shared by three deities, one of them being male: namely Mater Matuta, Fortuna, and Mars (therefore, a male figure is actively involved). Mater Matuta's task would be that of preserving mothers and their children through the earliest days of childhood until they come under the protection of Fortuna as political beings. Fortuna as Fortuna Virgo,⁴⁸ instead watched over new brides and brought them luck in their marriages. Thus, both deities would protect the future of the city in different ways.⁴⁹ The association between Matuta and Mars also makes sense as a pair of rites of passage - the baby across the dangerous first days of life; the boy across the difficult and testing transition into adulthood - with the military aspect enhanced by the nearby Porta Carmentalis.⁵⁰ Fortuna's festival date was June 11th, the same day as the *Matralia*, the holiday to Mater Matuta. The *Matralia* was celebrated by mothers and maternal aunts and had rites to do with childbirth and bringing up children; Fortuna Virgo's festival on this day was a way to connect new brides to their perceived duties of becoming good mothers. Both temples at the Forum Boarium are said to have been built by Servius Tullius, and both dedicated on June 11th (Ov., *Fasti* 6.479f., 569).⁵¹

⁴⁶ Ducatè-Paarmann, “Deux femmes”, 855; Ducatè-Paarmann, “Images”. There were two buildings (A and B). A is a rectangular structure without roof, B was likely the sanctuary. Only A was fully excavated. From the same deposit: 652 *kourophoroi*, 213 *kourotrophoi*, 9 double *kourophoros*. Dating: mainly 4th-3rd century BCE. Moreover, from the 6th-5th century BCE: standing women with dove, pomegranate, piglet; heads, women with infants, armed men. From 4th-3rd century: young boys with *toga* or *bulla*, swaddled babies, infants on their knees, animals (dove, ox), Aeneas carrying Anchises, a few anatomical votives (masks, feet, hands, breasts, female reproductive organs), loom weights.

⁴⁷ See Vagnetti, “Il deposito”, 73, Tav. XXXVII, G XXVII, a. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, inv. n. 1357.

⁴⁸ There is no scholarly consensus on Fortuna's function in childrearing. Indeed, there is little evidence of the Fortuna as *kourotrophos* (e.g., an inscription from Praeneste after a happy delivery CIL XIV 2863 = CIL I 60 + add. pp. 718, 868; Cic., *De div.*, II, 41; Arn., *Adv. Nat.*, 3, 67: offering of small *togae* by young maidens to Fortuna Virgo or Virginalis). Following Miano, “Fortuna”, conceptual approach to polytheism, moreover, however, I want to point out the huge semantic sphere of the word *fortuna* in Latin language: in my opinion, there is no reason to question the kourotrophic role of Fortuna. I am also aware of the fact that there is a controversy about who was worshipped on the Forum Boarium, Fortuna or Virgo Fortuna. I am only suggesting that the goddess might be Fortuna Virgo, but I am not taking it for granted. Concerning Mars, I am here following Smith 2000's hypothesis. According to Pisani Sartorio, Virgili, “Dioniso”, at the Forum Boarium, Athena / Fortuna (paired with Heracles) and Leukothea / Mater Matuta (paired with Dionysus) were worshipped (Mater Matuta along with Dionysus was worshipped also in Satricum).

⁴⁹ Smith, “Worshipping”, 143.

⁵⁰ Smith, “Worshipping”, 145. One should add a few further details to the global framework: the statue of Fortuna at the Forum Boarium is covered in male clothes; in the temple of Mater Matuta in Satricum we find the *lapis Satricanus* with a dedication made by the *soudales* of Mars; the Porta Carmentalis, and presumably the shrine of Carmenta - who, incidentally, plays an important role in the narrative of Ino/Leukothea - are part of the route of triumph and very close to the twin shrines at the Forum Boarium. This is all explained in an extremely detailed way by Christopher Smith.

⁵¹ Pedrucci, “Who”. To be more precise, it is a temple with two *cellae*, frequently labelled as “twin temples”. According to Pisani Sartorio, Virgili, “Dioniso”, during the Period of Kings there was only one temple dedicated to both Mater Matuta and Fortuna; then, during the Republican Period, it was “split” into two temples.

Mater Matuta⁵² and Fortuna – especially as Virgo – therefore were both related to the rituals of *kourotrophia* during which not only the mother or the mother-to-be, but the couple as a whole played a crucial role (as agents, as beneficiaries).

The other goddess is Juno who, especially as Juno Lucina, notoriously played an important role in protecting offspring during childbirth, as an outcome of a legal marriage.⁵³ The couple, here again, seems to be crucial.

On the Etruscan side, the two primary goddesses seem to be Artemis and Minerva. They are deities deeply involved in *kourotrophia*:⁵⁴ the latter, in particular, as protectress of the community. According to Cassius Dio (59.28.7), Caligula puts the daughter Drusilla in charge of Minerva to be suckled.⁵⁵ However, the association between Etruscan and Greek/Roman deities can be extremely tricky. The association is usually made on an iconographical basis, but the Etruscan deities maintain their original features, about which we know almost nothing. Fortunately, we have the mention of two Etruscan theonyms: Turan (Portonaccio) and Vei (Campetti, eponymous deity of Veii.) They are both related to rites of passage, especially for girls. Vei, in particular, in association with Apollo and Minerva, likely protected nuptial fertility.⁵⁶ I will not go further into the interpretation of these deities, but rather limit the analysis to the archaeological evidence, which suggests the worship of one or more deities, likely female, related to the protection of offspring, from their generation to their coming of age (and secondly, more generally, to some extent with the wellness of the human being as a whole). Breastmilk in this process plays obviously a crucial role.

The case of Portonaccio might be of particular interest. The presence of the architectural statue of a goddess (Leto, Niobe?)⁵⁷ with a child on her shoulder in such a prominent position might have captured the imagination of visitors, beyond the nature of the “official” worship performed there. It is worth noting that the gesture of the deity suggests protection.

Based on the analysis of the aforementioned archaeological material, it seems that in ancient Latium and Southern Etruria breastfeeding a baby was a gesture that was shared (literally and/or emotionally) within the household (among women and among women and men, at least the father). The fact that ex-votos that represent couples (mainly a man with a breastfeeding woman) were found within votive deposits suggests that breastfeeding was a primary concern for both the mother and the father, since the survival and good health of offspring relied on the availability of human milk. Religious means were used to request and protect lactation: not only by the mother, and not only in a private dimension, as scholars usually think. The father, as well as other family members, seem to have been involved in a practice that is usually perceived as exclusively maternal in a strictly biological sense. The involvement of the father and the place in which a significant number of votives were found, moreover, seem to confirm that the offspring was likely at the core of family life, community expectations and religious concerns.⁵⁸

3 The (Divine) Male Appropriation of Pregnancy and Childbirth: Two Case Studies from Southern Etruria and Imperial Rome

As I have already stated, pregnancy and childbirth are the only exclusively female and non-transferable functions related to motherhood. Nevertheless, we face negation, negotiation, and appropriation of

⁵² Ov., *Fasti* 6.559–560. See *infra*.

⁵³ Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamenti”, 179–190.

⁵⁴ Pedrucci, Scapini, “Il ruolo”; Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamenti”, 148–162.

⁵⁵ According to Bonfante, “Iconografia”, 92 (who wrongly indicates the chapter as 39), this was an Etruscan costume, but I could not find confirmation of it.

⁵⁶ Pitzalis, “Madri”, 175–176.

⁵⁷ See Neils, “Niobe”.

⁵⁸ See for instance Laes, “Children”.

pregnancy and childbirth in religious narratives and sacred images, mainly through male pregnancies and parthenogenesis, in different traditions.⁵⁹

I will offer here two examples of visual representations of two well-known narratives concerning Zeus’ deliveries. I picked up these two cases, since they show unusual, somehow grotesque, male appropriations of the very moment of labour in a very “female” way. Since artists and customers were usually men, the two images suggest that, at least in a few cases, men had some kind of familiarity with birth delivery and were not ashamed in commissioning it (even for a public funerary object like a sarcophagus). It is noteworthy these two cases do not concern any minor or local male deity, but Zeus himself, otherwise known as the Father of the gods and presented in some Greek myths as the founder of a new, fair cosmic order.

Zeus personally gives birth to two of his children: Athena and Dionysus. It is worth mentioning that both do have a mother in the womb of whom they are conceived and partially gestated. Thus, these are not cases of “parthenogenesis” or the generation of a new being by a single and often virgin entity. Zeus is more a sort of “incubator”.

Athena’s parents are Zeus and Metis, a nymph. Briefly summarized, the myth is that Zeus has heard a prophecy that the child Metis would give birth to after giving birth to Athena would have dethroned him. So, in order to prevent this from happening, he swallowed Metis while she was still pregnant with Athena. When the time came for Athena to be born, the smith god, Hephaistos, had to use an axe to crack Zeus’ head open.⁶⁰ Then, Athena stepped out, already grown up and in full armor. Athena, thus, is not born of a woman. Furthermore, since she was born not as a baby, but as a grown up, she did not need any protection, feeding, caring or nurturing. Therefore, it is logical that we find no othermother or substitutes in Athena’s case. This contrasts strongly with the case of Dionysus.

Dionysus’s parents are Zeus and Semele, daughter of Cadmus and Harmonia. Zeus’ relationship with Semele enraged Hera, his legitimate wife. In disguise, Hera persuaded the young lady to ask Zeus to visit her in the same splendour in which he would appear before his wife. Zeus had already promised to grant Semele her every wish and, thus, he had to do so and the splendour of his firebolts killed her.⁶¹ However, Zeus saved their unborn child, Dionysus (born twice), from the womb of the dead Semele. He then kept the gestating Dionysus in his thigh, until he was ready to be born. Let’s remember here that Dionysus, in contrast to Athena, is not fully divine at birth: his father is a god, but his mother is not a goddess. Then, right after birth, someone was needed to actually take care of the baby and raise him: first, the mother’s sister, Ino,⁶² is summoned, then the nymphs who also are feminine figures, and then Silenus, a minor male deity.

The birth of Athena was a favorite topic of Greek vase painters, and we also find quite many depictions of the birth of Dionysus. For the purpose of this paper, we selected two representations of each one of these births in which the male appropriation of childbirth is particularly evident.

The first one is a sarcophagus of the Imperial period (190 CE ca., place of discovery: *Via Salaria*) showing the triumphal march of Dionysus through the lands of India (Fig. 11).⁶³ On the lid is the birth of Dionysus and the nymphs receiving him. A midwife is prepared to deliver Dionysus from the thigh of Zeus, but the position of the midwife and of the god is typically that of women in labour.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ This Paragraph is a partial version of Pedrucci, “Not of Woman Born”, which contains also a section on Caesarian birth, which implies an absence of agency by the woman in labour (since she was already dead at the moment of the Cesarean section, see n. 11). This absence of agency leads to a negotiation, even to a negation, of the maternal role during childbirth. The issue in the Roman world was discussed mainly from a legal point of view.

⁶⁰ Hom., *Il.* 5.880; Hes., *Theog.* 885-900, 929e-t; Apol., *Bibl.* 1.3.6.

⁶¹ Ov., *Met.* 3.256-321, 4.416-542 (for Ino); Hyg., *Fab.* 167, 179; Apol., *Bibl.* 3.4.3; Luc., *Dial.* 9; Diod. Sic., 4.2; Non., *Dion.* 7.110-8.177-406.

⁶² For the maternal aunt, the *matertera* (literally, another mother, the second mother) especially in the Roman culture, see, e.g., Bettini, “Su alcuni”; Pedrucci, Scapini, “Il ruolo”; Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamenti”, 34f., 57ff. Cf. *supra* (*Matralia*).

⁶³ Available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Roman_-_Sarcophagus_with_the_Triumph_of_Dionysus_-_Walters_2331.jpg (last accessed 17 September 2019). The marble comes from Thasos; Athens is indicated as place of creation. It was found in the family chamber of the Calpurnii Pisones. The sarcophagus is today at the Walters Art Museum, accession number 23.31, v. <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/33305> (last accessed 17 September 2019). For the myth of Dionysus in the lands of India, see Buccino 2013.

⁶⁴ Gourevitch, “Grossesse”. For male pregnancy in ancient Greece, see Leitao, “The Pregnant”. For the mirror, see Conti, La “Patera Cospiana”.

Figure 11. Sarcophagus with the Triumph of Dionysus, 190 CE ca. From wikicommons.

Even more interesting is an Etruscan mirror depicting the birth of Athena (Arezzo, middle of the 4th century BCE. Fig. 12). The influence of Greek models is evident. Again, the position is that of women in labour. Interestingly, there is a midwife who bears him behind his back, pushing on his belly... which, of course, is completely useless, since he is delivering from his head!⁶⁵

Figure 12. Etruscan mirror depicting the birth of Athena (Arezzo, middle of the 4th century BCE). From Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamento”, 32, fig. 23.

There are mostly well-known narratives, but they have never been interpreted through the lens of maternal theory and the epistemological framework of “mothering figures”.

⁶⁵ Decker, “Manufacturing”, interestingly points out that Hephaistos, the blacksmith god connected with *techne*, which indicates “any process of creation beginning with intelligent conception” (p. 84), has an active role in three narratives concerning male appropriation of birth: the Athenian legend of autochthony, Zeus’s birth of Athena, and his creation of Pandora. She sees in these stories the mastery of nature through the practice of *techne*, a typical male feature, within the well-known (but too simplistic) dichotomy nature/woman and culture/man. Indeed, but what we want to underline is how Zeus appropriates the “natural” part of childbirth, at least in these two representations.

The Roman sarcophagus and the Etruscan mirror, in particular, depict two of these renowned myths in a very intriguing way. These Etruscan and Roman elaborations on the basis of earlier Greek narratives push “alternative mothering” up to a male appropriation of exclusively female gestures within a strictly female domain. Indeed, scenes of childbirth were likely quite unfamiliar for Greek and Roman men, who generally did not attend birth. Finding this type of images in the Greek and early Roman art is very unlikely. Nevertheless, on the one hand, Etruscans used to interpret Greek mythology in a more “private” and “female” way,⁶⁶ and, on the other hand, at the end of the 2nd century CE Roman sensitivity had evolved through contact with different peoples and changes in customs. The result is a quite unusual, somehow ridiculous, depiction of the most important god of the Olympus, father (and mother!) of all the gods.⁶⁷

Pliny the Elder (*NH* 35.140), to be more precise, describes Zeus in a similar way, but speaking of a Greek artist. According to him, “Ctesilochus a pupil of Apelles became famous for a saucy burlesque painting which showed Zeus in labour with Dionysus, wearing a woman’s nightcap and crying like a woman, while goddesses, who act as midwives”.⁶⁸ His witness is very relevant since we are informed that at least one Greek artist at the end of the 4th century BCE represented Zeus in labour in an irreverent and “feminine” way.

4 Some Examples of Animal and Male “Mothering” Figures in the Greek and Roman Narratives and Art

This section is about what Florence Pasche Guignard and I have previously labelled as “alternative mothering”,⁶⁹ but, as I have explained, I would rather speak of “mothering figures”.⁷⁰ I will focus here on mythological narratives concerning animal and male mothers and mothering figures.

Not only goddesses or feminine figures are involved as active agents in it. Indeed, there also are a few male deities actively engaged in *kourotrophia*, both in myths and in rituals.

Just to list a few examples, Pan is raised by his proud father Hermes,⁷¹ who also prompts Hera to breastfeed Dionysus (Eratosth., *Cat.* 44), and Chiron raises Achilles, who is not his biological son.⁷² Furthermore, anatomical female votives were found in some temples dedicated to Zeus. For instance, in Zeus *hypsistos*’s sanctuary, several ex-votos in the shape of female breasts were found.⁷³ And, according to Pausanias (8.26.6), in the city of Aliphera there was an altar of Zeus *Lecheates* (in child-bed) because it is said that he gave birth to Athena in this place. In Crete, in the cave of Amnisos, Zeus is associated with

⁶⁶ Cf. Bonfante, “Mothers”, 431-436; Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamento”, 34-35.

⁶⁷ Greeks and Romans knew the practice of the *couvade*, but they attributed it only to barbarians or animals. Bertocchi, “Il rito”, indeed, mentions an example of *couvade* in Cyprus in relation to Arianna’s cult, who died there in labour and was buried in the island: on the occasion of the feast in memory of the unfortunate girl, in fact, a young man would have mimed the pains of childbirth. The association between the *couvade* and a woman who died in childbirth is relevant. See also Romani, “Nascite”, 41-61; Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamenti”, 258.

⁶⁸ Ctesilochus, *Apellis discipulus, petulanti pictura innotuit Iove Liberum partoriente depicto mitrato et muliebriter ingemescente inter ostetricia dearum*.

⁶⁹ See unpublished paper entitled *Multiple Male Mothers? Representations of “Alternative Mothering” in the Ancient Greek and Roman Worlds*.

⁷⁰ See n. 10.

⁷¹ *Homeric Hymn 19 to Pan*, 27-46.

⁷² Apollod., *Bibl.* 3.13.6; Stat., *Achil.* 2.99f.; Philostr., *Her.* 20.2; *Etym. Magn.*, s.u. *Achilleus*. Bremmer, “Fosterage”, takes into account a few narratives of children raised by the maternal grandfather. He focuses on Theseus, but he mentions also other cases in the *Iliad*. Bremmer interprets them as examples of *fosterage* and points out that educating the children was a task of the mother’s family, while the father’s family would have played a more prominent role in public life. Cf. Pedrucci, *Maternità e allattamenti*, 56. In visual arts, from Hadzisteliou Price’s famous catalogue (Hadzisteliou Price, “Kourotrophos”) of kourotrophoi (pp. 70-72), we learn that Hermes was depicted as kourotrophos (with Dionysus, Heracles and Arkas); Silenus and Athamas with Dionysus; Plutos with Iakchos; Triton with Theseus; Poseidon with Taras; Euphorbos with Oedipus. See also Ajootian, “Male”, for Archaic and Classical images of men with children while performing religious rituals.

⁷³ Lajtar, “An alternative”, 166; Prête, “La donatrice”, 10. Cf. Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamenti”, 258.

Hera-Eileithyia and he was worshipped in the place where his umbilical cord was deposited.⁷⁴ The corresponding ritual was for women to bring the umbilical cord of their baby to thank the god after a safe childbirth. Moreover, we know about one epithet for the god Apollo: *Apollo kalliteknos* (with beautiful children) who had a temple in Pergamon,⁷⁵ though very little is known about this Apollo, its myth and its ritual, in contrast with the Apollo *Kourotrophos*, for whom there is more evidence and scholarship.⁷⁶

Concerning Rome, we have already seen that at the Forum Boarium, Athena / Fortuna paired with Heracles and Leukothea / Mater Matuta paired with Dionysus were worshipped. Here, another male god seemed to have played an important role: Mars. Mater Matuta along with Dionysus was also worshipped in Satricum, where the goddess had a renowned sanctuary. As I have argued above, at the Forum Boarium, both female and male deities, each with a different role⁷⁷ participate in *kourotrophia* as a whole - from birth to the care of infants, through rites of passage, until the threshold of adulthood.

I chose to focus on this Roman cameo because it features an interesting example of how divine *kourotrophia* can also involve male figures (Fig. 13). The image shows Silenus, who for sure is not the mother of the infant and not even a female figure. This cameo thus brings some insight into another aspect of divine male mothering figures: resting on a tree-trunk, the fat, bearded Silenus pours water over the little Bacchus, who is held in the arms of a seated nymph, while another nymph brushes the infant's hair. Notoriously, Dionysus was one of Zeus' children whom he birthed himself. Indeed, as we saw, Dionysus's mother Selene died while he was in her womb. In this image, there is a masculine figure who is taking care of the baby god by performing one of the most "maternal" tasks, according to ancient sources: bathing.⁷⁸ Furthermore, bathing the child is depicted here as a collective practice: several figures are taking active roles, and the baby is not depicted as left alone with *one* caregiver only.

Figure 13. Roman Cameo, 3rd century CE, childhood of Bacchus. From <https://hermitagemuseum.org/>

Animals rescuing, breastfeeding, or rearing babies or children is another form of "alternative motherhood" in Greek and Roman myths and legends. Among many examples of divine, semi-divine, or legendary characters, the most notorious cases include Romulus, Telephus, and Zeus. A few of these rescued babies are female as, for instance, Cybele and Camilla.⁷⁹ One author, Servius (*Aen.* 2.141), suggests that the fig tree

⁷⁴ Lévêque, "Les cultes", 254. Cf. Pedrucci, "L'allattamento", 136.

⁷⁵ Aristides (ed. Keil), 398. 18f., 469.4. See Hadzisteliou Price, "Kourotrophos", 72.

⁷⁶ Schol. *Od.* 19.86. For Apollo *kourotrophos*, see Viscardi, "Munichia", 75.

⁷⁷ See *supra*. Moreover, Schultz 2006, has shown that traditional divisions between "male" and "female" cults in Republican Rome are not borne out by epigraphy: e.g. women putting up altars to Hercules, or men making offerings to Diana. These evidences, however, are not strictly related to pregnancy or childbirth.

⁷⁸ Pedrucci, "Maternità e allattamenti", 42, 74-75, 98, 192, 203, 238.

⁷⁹ McCartney, "Greek", Bettini, Borghini, "Il bambino"; Pedrucci, "Breastfeeding".

itself could have fed milk to the twins. This unusual lore seems to have a precedent in Egyptian art.⁸⁰ In the case of breastfeeding, we face a remarkable negation of a typical female biological function: an animal, or even a plant, replaces a lactating woman. According to Lucian of Samosata (13.22), men could appropriate this function. However, this was not possible here on earth, but only on the moon. On the moon, men give birth from their calf (lower leg). Though Lucian’s text does not directly suggest this, we may also wonder if, since women are supposed to be absent on the moon, men possibly also breastfeed their offspring.

5 Conclusions

This special issue clearly shows how religion and mothering issues are strictly intertwined, also in ancient societies, such as the Greek, Etruscan,⁸¹ and Roman ones, which are usually considered as dominated by men, especially when it comes to religion. Whether we look at votive religion, other kinds of artefacts, or at mythological and legendary narratives, we can find the presence of men within typically “women’s business”. In some extreme cases, we face the male appropriation of exclusively female functions such as pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding.

The aforementioned – heterogeneous – documentation can be, at least partially, read as male expression of control on and/or envy of female capacities and roles. I am not denying this, but I would suggest a further reading, which does not necessarily negate the other ones: men – at least some of them⁸² – were physically present in infants’ existences from womb to adulthood and were aware of difficulties and risks for the mother and the baby. They were active parts in *kourotrophia*.

The collected documentation, moreover, suggests that the mother was not the unique – or not the main – child caretaker within the ancient family and that “the maternal” as a component of identity should not be reduced to “natural” or “biological” elements, but, instead, is culturally constructed, including in mythological narratives and in ritual practices. Not only do we have images in which women (besides the mother, wet-nurses, nurses, grand-mothers, elder sisters) share space and time in taking care of the infants, but also men (fathers, pedagogues, grand-fathers) and women share space and time. Especially through a closer look at mythological narratives, we see that these also hold the potential to shatter our own culturally constructed norms around gender and parenting roles. It is well known that the father was an active figure in the rearing of the offspring, but what might be surprising is that he can engage in this side by side with female members of the *oikos/familia*. This is particularly true within the Roman culture. Aulus Gellius (*Noctes Atticae* 12, 1-23), for instance, reports of a heated debate between the father and the mother-in-law concerning who was the right person to breastfeed the newborn. Boundaries between genders seem to have been much more flexible than we usually think.

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⁸⁰ Muñoz Fernández, “Iconografiías”, 219, Fig. 4. Cf. Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamenti”, 256.

⁸¹ The Etruscan a bit less in comparison with the others, see, just as an example, Pedrucci, “Maternità e allattamento”. Cf. n. 36.

⁸² Out of necessity, the aristocratic part of the society, which commissioned the majority of artifacts and wrote the narratives.

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