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Beliefs on milk and breast-feeding in the ancient world

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Breastfeeding is now viewed as the most 'natural' act of a mother toward the new-born, but in the classical context had a rather more problematic position in the maternity package. Sources from the Roman imperial period certainly suggest that there was debate about the medical and moral benefits (or otherwise) of mothers breastfeeding their children, and, as in other areas too, 'naturalness' is a disputed term and value. That this kind of activity is shared with other animals often does not count in its favour, humans are different. But, part of that difference is about our ethical capacities, and not determining a course of action on the wrong basis: for reasons of idleness or vanity, rather than health or welfare. There is also evidence for the use of wet-nurses, nursing as a means of making a living, in a range of contexts; which is to say that there is, in a sense, no alternative. The choice is about who provided the milk, not what kind of milk itself. More generally speaking, some sources seem to suggest that the milk was thought of as an aliment only for children, women, old people and barbarians. A healthy young citizen was not supposed to drink milk, but it could be used in magic or medical potions.

Biography

Giulia Pedrucci holds an MSc Degree in Fine Arts. She then decided to specialize in a particularly challenging discipline: Cultural Anthropology of the Ancient World, at the Center for Anthropology and Ancient History in Siena, for which, for promoting collaboration among classicists, historians, anthropologists, semioticists and culture theorists, she has become famous throughout Europe and in the United States. She is member of the international project *Lactation in History: a Crosscultural Research on Suckling Practices, Representations of Breastfeeding and Politics of Maternity in a European Context*. She has published three monographs and several articles (in particular: G.Pedrucci, Sanguemestruale e latte materno: riflessioni e nuoveproposte. *Intorno all'allattamento nella Grecia antica*, Gesnerus70, 2013, 260-291).

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