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# Rosetta

**Special Issue** *From the Breast: Representations and Interpretations of Breastfeeding and Infant Feeding in Pre-Modern Cultures*  
Seminar Series and Workshop

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## ***From the Breast: Foreword***

Cannon Fairbairn & Agni Agathi C. Papamichael

The inspiration for the *From the Breast* project arose upon noticing a lack of connection between studies of pre-modern infant feeding and those of modern experiences and research, especially in art history and related areas. As has been proven in countless other projects in the Humanities, we felt that an interdisciplinary approach would help to bridge this gap, allowing those studying pre-modern cultures to engage with modern resources and knowledge. Further, such a project would provide a great way to make pre-modern history and research accessible and relevant to modern audiences. And thus, the *From the Breast* Seminar Series and Workshop was developed.

The project primarily focused on pre-modern depictions and references to infant feeding practices but moved into early modern and modern perspectives and experiences during the culminating Workshop, which took place at the University of Birmingham on 12 May 2023. The primary research questions for the project were:

- How is breastfeeding represented or not represented in the art and literature of different cultures and eras?
- How does it reflect and what role does it play in cultural values, traditions, and rituals?
- How can our modern understanding and experiences with breastfeeding better inform our interpretation of pre-modern breastfeeding representations and practice?
- How has our modern relationship with breastfeeding potentially biased our understanding and interaction with pre-modern breastfeeding?

The project was inspired by the methodology set out in *Revisiting Collections*, a methodology developed by the Museums, Libraries, and Archives Council and Collections Trust, which 'supports museums and archives to open up their collections for scrutiny by community groups and external experts and to build and share a new understanding of the multi-layered meaning and significance of objects

and records'.<sup>1</sup> This methodology encourages museum staff to consider groups that may have interest, expertise, or stake in the objects within their collections. It then encourages museums to invite these groups, often in the form of focus groups, to participate in the interpretation of the objects, often resulting in the designing or writing of an exhibition incorporating this range of expertise and perspective.<sup>2</sup> While we were not looking at a specific museum collection in this case, but rather a range of objects, images, and texts, we felt that this methodology was especially relevant to our efforts to foster interdisciplinary discussion around the topic of infant feeding and breastfeeding in pre-modern cultures. We considered those with an interest, stake, or expertise in breastfeeding — academics, parents, caregivers, medical professionals, artists, community members, and so on. From there we sought to design events which would allow these various groups to have productive and meaningful conversations, with each being an equal contributor in the discussions and interpretations. Further, by employing such a methodology, all interested parties would be able to find a benefit in the proceedings, not just those looking at pre-modern breastfeeding academically, but also those seeking to support modern infant-feeders, artists engaging with the subject of breastfeeding, and medical professionals seeking a way to encourage greater discussion on the topic. In this way, it became a project of interdisciplinary exploration and co-creation.

In recent years research on motherhood, parents, caregivers, and women's health have risen in prominence and popularity among academics of various disciplines. Many have turned to interdisciplinary research and collaboration in order to better examine and explore these often overlooked and elusive topics. An early manifestation of this rising scholarly trend can be noted in 'Des Nourrices aux Banques de Lait', a research group formed in 2013 at the University of Geneva. Soon afterwards, in 2014, Stephanie Lynn Budin published her book *Images of Woman and Child from the Bronze Age: Reconsidering Fertility, Maternity, and Gender in the Ancient World*, which examined similar depictions of mothers and their children from various Bronze Age cultures. Further, in November 2021, the Centre for Medieval Arts & Rituals of the University of Cyprus hosted the conference

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<sup>1</sup> Collections Trust, *Revisiting Museum Collections*, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Collections Trust, *Revisiting Museum Collections*. Find more information at <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/resource/revisiting-collections/>. Accessed 2 February 2024.

*Lactating Breasts: Motherhood and Breastfeeding in Antiquity and Byzantium*, which invited scholars from across disciplines to present and discuss their research on the very specific topic of breastfeeding. In June 2023, the Maternal Bodies Network hosted the first *Maternal Bodies: Individual, Collective, Other Symposium* at the University of Birmingham, which explored a variety of topics surrounding the idea of maternity through artistic, academic, and personal experience. The *From the Breast Seminar Series* and Workshop sought to contribute to this discussion while broadening the interdisciplinary scope, taking in modern experts, artists, and those with personal expertise.

The project consisted of six monthly seminars from October 2022 to March 2023, each consisting of two speakers. Presenters hailed from all over Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas, and represented multiple stages of academic development and achievement. Their presentations utilised a rich scope of primary sources and varied in topic, methodology, time period, and cultures, ranging from prehistoric Italy to twelfth-century France, and from the ancient Mediterranean, Maghreb and Middle East to eighth-century Japan. The seminars were observed by a dedicated and expanding core of regular attendees, which included academics, healthcare professionals, parents, caretakers, researchers, students, and individuals of various ages, cultural backgrounds, and degrees of engagement with breastfeeding and infant feeding.

In tandem with the presentations, the concluding discussions between all participants identified several key aspects in the diachronic role and representations of infant- and breastfeeding in and by different past and present communities. In particular, we noted recurring associations of breastfeeding with both mundane and divine notions of physical well-being and ethical cultivation, as well as properties of virtue-transportation attributed to maternal milk. Turning from the means (milk) and recipients (infants) to the providers (breastfeeding mothers, wet nurses, and other caretakers), we discussed the position of these providers, often absent from historical narratives, within society, along with the ways in which ideals regarding breastfeeding both shaped and were influenced by gender expectations. Finally, we touched on modern cultural and academic engagements with breastfeeding and infant-feeding, proposing ways to advance their study beyond past taboos and

misconceptions, so as to bring to light the often silent stories of those mothers, nurses and care-givers.

Expanding on these themes, the culminating workshop brought in additional perspectives and invited self-reflection on our understanding of breastfeeding and infant feeding in pre-modern cultures. These additional perspectives were expressed through not only the expertise of academics from the Humanities (some returning from the seminars and some joining for the first time), but also through the lens of contemporary artists and a medical professional, who tremendously helped in deciphering modern ideas, attitudes, and practical challenges regarding breastfeeding. The workshop further explored how these affect research, with participating scholars pinpointing methodological problems they faced during their research and working towards ways to overcome them.

To address these topics and facilitate dialogue between presenters and audience, the workshop was divided in two panels and a roundtable discussion, interpolated by breakout rooms. Panel 1: Representations of Breastfeeding in Art and Literature echoed themes of ethical and divine symbolism and (in)visibility addressed in the seminar series, introducing an even more expansive palette of time periods, cultures, and primary sources, and drawing thought-provoking parallels and reflections on modern attitudes. Further resonating with a theme discussed in the seminars, Panel 2: Relationships Between Communities and Breastfeeding looked at personal, interpersonal, and communal interaction and utilisation of breastfeeding to various ends, taking this often private action into a public sphere. Finally, the Roundtable Discussion invited past seminar presenters to reflect on their research journeys and locate methodological challenges on account of the interference of modern and androcentric attitudes towards breastfeeding marring our understanding of it throughout history. Their proposed solutions to these problems lie within interdisciplinarity and hands-on engagement with breastfeeders and breastfeeding practices, which, although inevitably bearing the mark of our times, may still hold strong connections to pre-modern traditions. Meanwhile, in the breakout rooms, which were heavily based in the focus groups used in *Revisiting Collections*, all participants were asked to examine and discuss in groups a selection of breastfeeding-related textual and visual primary sources curated by the presenters.

This allowed participants to share their own interpretations, understandings, and experiences in a friendly and co-creative environment. Within this palpably productive and positive environment, the workshop thus succeeded in bringing together a mosaic of perspectives, concerns, and methodologies, and, hopefully, contributed to the best of its capacity in the shaping of a brighter future for the practice and study of breastfeeding and infant feeding.

Through a collection of seminar papers and reflection pieces, contributed by a number of seminar and workshop participants, this publication brings forth some of the themes and topics discussed in the *From the Breast* Seminar Series and Workshop. Within this issue, the figure of the (maternal and breastfeeding) woman rises to the forefront, with her daily and moral duties, emotions, agency, and power within her family and broader community being explored through a wealth of primary evidence. The significance of breastfeeding as a marker of feminine identity and an extension of women's role within different societies is highlighted in the articles. Moreover, through the reflection pieces, the contributors draw attention to problems regarding both the study of and modern attitudes towards breastfeeding, demonstrating how such problems can be overcome through research, education, and engagement with breastfeeding practitioners and experts, and assessing the *From the Breast* series's place within this endeavour.

An intriguing exercise in interdisciplinarity, Stephanie Lynn Budin's contribution evokes textual, artistic, and archaeological evidence from various ancient Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cultures, as well as from pre-modern Japan, to investigate the exclusivity of women as breastfeeders in said cultures' artistic and textual products. By enquiring why male deities, often depicted as creators and birth-givers, are excluded from the role of breastfeeder, Budin explores the physical and metaphysical aspects of nourishment and connectivity, and their inherent association with the female gender. As such, scenes of women as breastfeeders emerge as reflections of women's capacity as pivotal providers of food and as instigators of social mobility and hierarchical advancement, highlighting the influence and agency women could wield in the societies in question, as well as the symbolically nourishing and transformative nature of breastfeeding.

Focus then shifts to the maternal aspect of female identity and its posthumous resilience in Francesca Fulminante and Giulia Pedrucci's archaeological surveys of burials and sanctuaries throughout Iron Age and Archaic Italy. In particular, in her still ongoing project, Fulminante acknowledges suspension rings (burial gifts associated with motherhood in the Early Iron Age) as markers of maternal identity in adult female burials, and as possible indicators of parental grieving and lamentation over unfulfilled potential in the burials of girls. Turning to the Archaic period, Pedrucci focuses on figurines of nursing or child-holding women found in sanctuaries and tombs, interpreting them as manifestations of parental concern, well-wishing, or grieving. With their diachronic approach, the two authors discern usually invisible facets of parental identities and familial ties, in which breastfeeding emerges as a means of bonding and caring for children — in this life, or the next.

Motherhood remains a central theme in Sarah Cullinan-Herring's exploration of motherly and feminine ideals in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy. Drawing from Melanie Klein's theory on breastfeeding as a pivotal factor in a child's mental development and a significant step in mother-child bonding, Cullinan-Herring deciphers the character of husband-murdering, child-banishing, and adulterous Clytemnestra as a subversion and perversion of Classical Athenian ideals of motherhood and womanhood. As is argued, Clytemnestra's overall absence from her children's upbringing, evident, among other things, from her not nursing them, renders her a failing mother, as opposed to her son's, Orestes, more nurturing wet nurse, Cilissa. While Clytemnestra's failing motherhood has so far been insufficiently studied, acknowledging its impact on Orestes's psyche adds an extra layer of meaning behind his motivation in killing her: he was not only avenging his father, but he was punishing his negligent mother. This reading places a considerable deal of importance on motherhood and all of its practical extensions, including breastfeeding.

Moving millenia and miles ahead, photographer Lisa Creagh's reflection piece reveals the lack of infrastructural and societal support breastfeeding mothers are faced with in the modern day UK. The daily struggles and joys of these mothers are given a voice in her  *Holding Time*  project, an interdisciplinary initiative aiming to provide a platform of expression for breastfeeding mothers, to educate and sensitise

the public about the physical and mental benefits of breastfeeding for mothers and children, and to draw attention to the challenges modern society imposes upon breastfeeders. Similar challenges are noted both in everyday society and within academia by archaeologist Sarah Mady, who astutely observes the stigmatisation of breastfeeding practices and an androcentric discomfort regarding casual and academic discourse on breastfeeding. Turning to the study of the past, Mady urges the preservation of ages-old oral and practical traditions as a means of destigmatising and more constructively engaging with breastfeeding beyond our modern biases.

Indeed, as Shakespeare expert Patricia Lennox points out in her own reflection piece, despite its relative invisibility in writings and works of art throughout history, breastfeeding, in fact, 'keeps turning up, even in unexpected places' (see p. 152). Recalling the sources discussed in the *From the Breast* Workshop breakout rooms, as well as findings from her own research, Lennox affirms the subtle, yet unmistakable presence of breastfeeding in past and modern cultural products, ending on an optimistic note regarding the future of research in the field. At the same time, medievalist Rebecca Winer, ever alert *vis-à-vis* the obstacles against infant- and breastfeeding in Europe and the USA, places *From the Breast* within an emerging scholarly mobilisation actively seeking to destigmatise and facilitate dialogue around infant feeding options, and thus easing parents and caretakers into the best feeding strategy for themselves and their children. As per the methodology proposed in *Revisiting Collections*, Winer's assessment demonstrates how, with sensitivity regarding societal problems and engagement with the people directly concerned, academic research can contribute to the solution of said problems in a meaningful way.

As addressed in the reflection pieces in this issue, many important and stimulating conversations arose as a result of the seminar series and workshop, and many continue to be held, such as discussions around methodologies and means of uncovering the often silent or lost voices of infant-feeders, care givers, and women in pre-modern history; how modern knowledge can aid in our understanding of past infant feeding practices; how pre-modern research can lend support and aid to those seeking to support modern infant feeders, caregivers, and infant-feeders; and so on.



Attendees of the conference have continued to stay in contact and work together on a variety of projects. This publication is an excellent example and we thank all those that have joined us for this issue of *Rosetta* journal. It is wonderful to see this conversation continue through similar projects, such as *Maternal Bodies*, and many others.

In this spirit, we are thankful to friends and colleagues Ambika Raja and Anna Packman for their help in organising, promoting and running each event in the series.

Equal gratitude is to be extended to all those that presented in the seminar series as well as all of our wonderful workshop participants. We would also like to thank all those that attended the events and participated in the discussions.

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Finally, we wish to express our everlasting gratitude to our families, friends, and loved ones, as well as every parent, medical practitioner, midwife, and caretaker who has been and still is putting the effort, overcoming scrutiny, and pushing forward to provide the best for the children in their care. May happy days be ahead for you.

## **Bibliography**

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