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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

Mady, Sarah (2024); 'How Modern Perspectives on Breastfeeding Affect Research'

Rosetta **28.5**: 143-146

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25500/rosetta.bham.00000022>

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# How Modern Perspectives on Breastfeeding Affect Research

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The *From the Breast* workshop focused on the interpretations and representations of breastfeeding and infant feeding in pre-modern cultures. The participants' backgrounds and their rich interventions, along with my own research, inspired these reflections on how modern perspectives on breastfeeding affect our research in archaeology and the study of the past. These reflections will then be divided into two main parts: the study of ethnoarchaeology and the study of the historical and archaeological record.

It is beyond the scope of my brief intervention here to present a comprehensive study, and I will limit my reflections on this workshop to my own research. In my doctoral dissertation (Mady, 2023), I studied the archaeologies of motherhood through caves and shrines that women have used to gather, mourn, and heal infants and the maternal body. Being a mother myself, my research was initially inspired by my own motherhood, along with the challenges and solutions brought forth by the modern world.

The modern world, especially within academia, has been an excellent space for scholars to communicate, connect, peer review, and network. This workshop is a perfect example of scholars, artists, and community members collaborating to discuss a single topic. Yet the modern world and its perspectives have not been fully helpful when researching topics such as breastfeeding. The modern world puts a lot of shame around nursing and a mother's breasts. This shame sometimes pushes mothers to seek out others who share a similar experience and thus build a support system. Thus, mothers and women form a network of matchmakers, wet nurses, babysitters, and midwives, often labeled as witches, uneducated, and unsophisticated. Wet nursing was not always a paid service but was also offered as a charity, one mother's way of helping a sister or a neighbor unable to nurse or lactate.

As archaeologists (and other scholars who study the past), we face many challenges, such as presentism, the loss of collective memory, oral histories, lack of archaeological

evidence, and all the misinterpretations that are produced along the way. For those of us who are employing methods in ethnography and ethnoarchaeology, we must be fully immersed in the cultures we are studying to be able to fill in the blanks pushed forth by the loss of information and collective memory. We have all faced interviewees who, when questioned about the origins or the meaning of a tradition, shrug and answer: 'It's tradition!'. From holidays to family traditions, we have all contributed to perpetuating traditions without knowing their whole meaning and origin. Thus, the study of culture alone is not enough; a researcher must be fully immersed in the culture they are studying to be able to decipher the symbolism and propose a valid interpretation (Abu-Lughod, 2008). Many stories, traditions, and even healing recipes get lost, and their benefits become long forgotten as they get sucked into 'tradition', thus losing their association with lactation.

One tradition that is still alive in Lebanon when a child is born is making *meghli*, a spiced rice pudding. Lebanese Christians also make the dessert on Christmas to celebrate the birth of Jesus. While most people do not know why *meghli* is a must-have when a child is born, they happily prepare the rice pudding and serve it to guests who come to welcome the newborn. *Meghli* is made with rice flour, cinnamon, anise, and caraway, which give it a dark, earthy color. Upon serving, it is topped with crunchy nuts, primarily almonds, pistachios, walnuts, shredded coconut, and dried fruits. Although lost to many who enjoy the delicious dessert, its meaning lies within its ingredients that have been used by mothers to induce lactation and provide energy. Its dried ingredients can be stored and used year-round, regardless of the season, making it an accessible and affordable food for the *postpartum* period. Paying attention to all the details surrounding *meghli* is the only way to give us enough information on its use, meaning, and origins. What started as a superfood for mothers became a dessert served to visiting guests and shared by Christians on Christmas. The modern perspective and shame surrounding breastfeeding erase stories such as this one from a culture's collective memory. The main question here is: what methods can we develop to unearth such stories and show their powerful meaning?

The archaeological record is also packed with artifacts that have been ignored due to their female association. Female figurines have been typically interpreted as goddesses of fertility, ignoring any other function they might have had, such as representations of average women or educational tools used to educate young females. The ancient infant feeding bottle is another artifact that has not been thoroughly studied. These have often been dismissed as *askoi*, vessels used in cosmetics, and rarely in medicine. While similar vessels might have been used as such, one cannot ignore their potential use as infant feeding bottles. The discipline of archaeology has been heavily androcentric and has thus ignored or misinterpreted many of these artifacts. However, recent studies have proven their use thanks to lipid analyses (Dunne et al., 2019), but more work must be done.

Archaeology is not the only discipline that has been androcentric, as the historical record is also silent when it comes to women, mothers, and their achievements. Women rarely wrote or contributed to the historical record and were only mentioned when their behavior was exceptional or posed a problem (Fiorenza, 1994; Ulrich, 2008). Even those who were among the best physicians were rarely named, such as the daughter and granddaughter of famous Arab-Islamic physician Ibn Zuhr.

Modern perspectives on breastfeeding affect research, but they, too, are the results of centuries of knowledge that has been produced within an androcentric language. Our aims today as scholars of the past should go beyond unearthing ancient stories, as it is equally important to examine when, how, and why they were buried and removed from our collective memory. While modern perspectives can be extremely useful and influenced by excellent methodologies, they can, at the same time, be burdened with androcentrism and misrepresentations of the past.

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