

## WET-NURSING IN MEDICAL LITERATURE AND GREEK PAPYRI

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Greek and Roman societies experienced infant exposure. Their laws did not address the rights of the embryo to life. Husbands filed law suits against their wives who aborted themselves not because they killed their foetus but because they denied them their heirs. The women's act was considered against the society for it denied it its prospective citizens.<sup>1</sup> Medical authorities, on the other hand, took interest in what relates to children from the moment of conception till they grow up.<sup>2</sup> They were also concerned with selecting the best wet-nurse who could bring up a child. They wrote on her regimen, her milk and her duties and obligations. Our sources are Mnesitheus of Cyzicus, Rufus of Ephesus, Soranus of Ephesus and Galen.<sup>3</sup> How much these doctors are indebted to earlier writers is irrelevant here. My

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<sup>1</sup> Etienne, Robert. "Ancient medical conscience and the life of children", The Journal of Psychohistory, vol.4 (2), 1976, pp. 133-134.

<sup>2</sup> Bradley was correct in noticing that Soranus, though "assumed that infants had no inherent right to be reared (Gynaecology 2.12), was amazingly punctilious about the care of those worth preservation". Keith R. Bradley, "Wet-nursing at Rome: A study in social relations" in Beryl Rawson's The family in ancient Rome, n. 19, p. 223. Needless to say that Soranus was interested in drawing the attention to which infant is medically fit to survive, and which is not. He should not be grouped with those who exposed children or believed in doing so.

<sup>3</sup> Mnesitheus (Oribasius, Collectiones Medicae, lib. incert. 15); Rufus (ibid, 13-14, 20); Galen (ibid, 16), De Sanitate tuenda I, 9-11; Soranus Gynaikeia (Gynaecology), II, 12-15, 21 (References are for the CMG's edition throughout unless it is otherwise indicated) (32-35, 41 Rose's edition). It is important to note that Rufus' authorship of these chapters is disputable. However for their closeness to some Arabic fragments, which are attributed to Rufus by al-Baladi and Ibn al-Jazzar (the Arabic authors), I shall be using them as Rufus' own.

intention is to relate medical recommendations concerning wet-nursing selection, her regimen, and her duties towards the child (in particular feeding, and later weaning). I shall be looking at the medical opinion in comparison with some almost contemporaneous Greek papyri concerning wet-nursing which come from Roman Egypt.<sup>4</sup> I shall be measuring the degree of medical awareness among the laity presented in the papyri. I shall also be arguing that doctors, by considering these matters, were responding to social needs for recognizing the qualities of the prospective wet-nurse.

#### Nurse selection

It seems that Greek doctors did not discuss the babies need for being nursed by their mothers. According to the fifth century encyclopedist, Oribasius, only Mnesitheus of Cyzicus did say that "mothers are considered the best in nursing their own babies; if they cannot, one of their relatives or those who are similar to them in shape".<sup>5</sup> Hiring a wet-nurse was the alternative and it seemed to be a common practice in Graeco-Roman societies as medical works, papyri and inscriptions indicate.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> BGU I 297; IV 1058, 1106, 1107, 1108, 1109, 1110, 1111, 1112, 1153, I ; P. Rein II 103, 104; PSI III 203, IX 1065; Aegyptus XIII p. 563 f.; P. Meyer 11; P. Bour 14; P. Cairo Preis. 31 V 17-28, XVI 71-84; P. Tebt. II 399; P. Oxy I 37, 38, 91, XIV 1717; P. Grenf. II 75; P. Mich. V 238; P. Ryl. II 178, 342.

<sup>5</sup> Orib., Coll. Med., lib. incert., 15, 7.

<sup>6</sup> For medical works and papyri see supra. For inscriptions see Bradley, "Wet-nursing at Rome: a study in social relations", in Rawson's The family in ancient Rome. Bradley's study of inscriptions has led him to maintain that hired nursing was known to lower classes as well as to upper classes at least in Roman

Greek doctors responded to their society's need of recognizing the qualities of a prospective wet-nurse by drawing a list of such qualifications. Physical appearance was one of the most important criteria Greek doctors stressed.<sup>7</sup> Some of those physical qualifications seem easy to be examined by mere sight, while others such as what concerns breasts and nipples need close scrutiny. They are hard to be checked without violating the decency of the nurse.<sup>8</sup> In such respects hearsay might have been a factor in selecting the nurse. Soranus recommended that the chosen nurse should have given birth twice or three times before.<sup>9</sup> Mnesitheus went a step further by recommending that she should have nursed more children of the same sex of the baby.<sup>10</sup> He said that the nurse's milk should not be used but after forty

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society. Bradley, loc. cit., p. 201. Soranus' recommendations of different types of exercises according to the nurse's means as well as the low wages of some nurses in nursing documents may support Bradley's argument.

<sup>7</sup> Mnesitheus apud Oribasius, *ibid.*, 15, 2, 8; Rufus, *ibid.*, 13, 3-4; Soranus, *ibid.*, II, 12, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Temkin explains Soranus' choice of particular nipples (neither too compact nor too porous) with Asclepiades' theory of atoms and pores, which the Methodists had reinterpreted. (Owsei Temkin, *Soranus' Gynecology*, p. xxxiii). It is interesting to add that Rufus, who was not a Methodist, recommended the same type of nipples.

<sup>9</sup> Soranus, *ibid.*, II, 12, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Orib., *Coll. Med.*, lib. incert., 15, 5. Soranus criticizes those who say so for they do not pay attention to that mothers who have twins, one is male and the other is female, nourish them with the same food. Moreover animals use the same nourishment which do not make either of the two sexes more feminine or less masculine. Soranus, *ibid.*, II, 12, 20.

days from the day of her delivery.<sup>11</sup> Soranus thought that two or three months must have elapsed between labour and beginning of breast feeding so that her milk will be better in quality.<sup>12</sup> I can assume that this advice takes into consideration the nurse's condition so that she can rest before offering her services.

An important criterion in selecting the wet-nurse was her age. Greek doctors disagreed among themselves on the most suitable age for wet-nursing. Mnesitheus thought that her age should not exceed thirty but less with a year or two, whereas Rufus thought that she should be between twenty five and thirty five of mother's age.<sup>13</sup> Soranus chose her between twenty and forty for "younger women are not experienced in child upbringing; they are still careless and childish in their minds. Milk in older women... is more watery, while in women at their prime, every physical function is at its best".<sup>14</sup> As one can see there is a change within time in the medical opinion. This could be ascribed to a new medical awareness to the longevity of female fertility in the Roman age.<sup>15</sup> A Greek nursing contract from

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<sup>11</sup> Orib., *ibid.*, 15, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Soranus, *ibid.*, II, 12, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Orib., *Coll. Med.*, lib. incert., 15, 4; *Ibid.*, 13, 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> Soranus, *ibid.*, II, 12, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Rufus agrees with Hesiod on eighteen as the age proper for getting girls married. Orib., *ibid.*, lib. inc. 2, 1-4. Rufus compares between the present and the past in favour of the past. This leads us to think that girls at his time got married even earlier. On the other hand Soranus thinks that 14 is a suitable age for girls for defloration. Soranus, *ibid.*, I, 8, 33.

Roman Egypt supports the reformed medical opinion : the nurse was forty of age.<sup>16</sup>

A wet-nurse must be in general free from all diseases : in particular from epilepsy, hysterical suffocation and neurotic disorders.<sup>17</sup> It seems that these diseases could be transmitted from the nurse to the nursling. Unfortunately it is not clear the mode of transmission, but the nurse's milk is a possibility. However singling out these diseases carries within a fear from their occurrence especially in babies. A fear might be justified by medical experience and possible difficulty of recovery.

Doctors were also concerned with listing moral qualities the wet-nurse should possess. They agreed that she should be prudent, clean, tidy, not ill-tempered, sympathetic, merry, easy going, gentle and self-controlled in relation to drinking and sexuality.<sup>18</sup> Soranus explains that the nurse's moral

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<sup>16</sup> P. Bour. 14, 5. By the time she completes her contract the wet-nurse will be forty two which is rather old. In general wet-nurses surviving contracts and receipts from Roman Egypt do not indicate the nurse's age except for three (P. Bour. 14; B.G.U. 297, 7 where the nurse is thirty, an age which completely corresponds with medical recommendations; and P. Meyer 11, 3 where the age was previously indicated but is no longer legible.

<sup>17</sup> Mnesitheus apud Oribasius, *ibid.*, lib. inc. 15, 3. According to Rufus parsley and the nurse's thick milk lead to epilepsy. *Orib.*, *ibid.*, 13, 13, 28.

<sup>18</sup> *Orib.*, *Coll. Med.*, lib. incert. 15, 4; *ibid.*, 13, 5; Soranus, *ibid.* II, 12, 19. According to Soranus coitus cools the nurse's affection toward the child. It spoils her milk and even leads to pregnancy. Drinking harms the nurse in soul and body. It puts the child in danger when the nurse goes to sleep leaving the baby unattended. The baby might fall ill through her spoiled milk.

It seems that Soranus thought that smelling in babies at that tender age is so developed that the odour of the swaddling

characteristics have a bearing on the way she performs her duties and consequently affect the baby. Exclusive moral and physical qualifications might have been the reason behind Mnesitheus' choice of Thracian or Egyptian (or the like) wet nurses. On the other hand Soranus prefers her Greek so that the child gets accustomed to the best language, and not for any other reasons. However it is difficult to infer that moral qualities are transmitted with the nurse's milk. Soranus admits that by nature the child becomes similar to the nurse in disposition.<sup>19</sup> As Soranus gives no biological explanations we are entitled to infer that by living together the child picks up her qualities. Despite their understanding of the value of moral qualities doctors did not discuss the wet-nurse's best social status: whether she should be free or slave, married or single.

In order that the baby should be safely and successfully Soranus recommended the provision of several wet-nurses.<sup>20</sup> It

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clothes which are not frequently changed due to the nurse's untidy mindedness upsets the baby's stomach.

<sup>19</sup> Soranus, *ibid.*, II, 12, 19. According to Bradley Plutarch objected mercenary wet nursing because it prevented emotional bonding between mother and child. Bradley added that Favorinus had agreed on Plutarch's opinion, and had added that it had a corrupting influence on children, especially if the wet nurse was a foreign slave woman, because the nurse's milk transmitted her moral characteristics to the child. Bradley also mentioned that Tacitus (*Dialogus* 29.1) had shared with Quintilian (I.1.4-5) the argument of corruptive influence. Bradley argued that their motive was snobbery more than biological. Bradley, "Wet-nursing at Rome: A study in social relations, in Rawson's The family in ancient Rome, p. 214. Bradley's argument could be correct given the silence of the medical authorities concerning biological transmission.

<sup>20</sup> Soranus, *ibid.*, II, 12, 20.

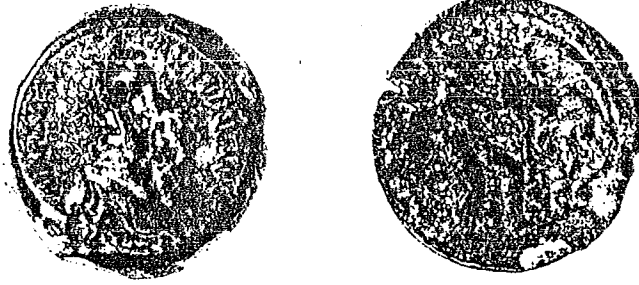


fig. 1

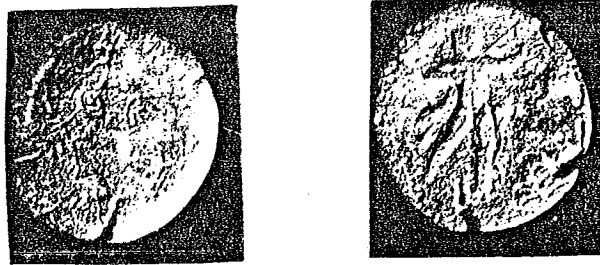


fig. 2

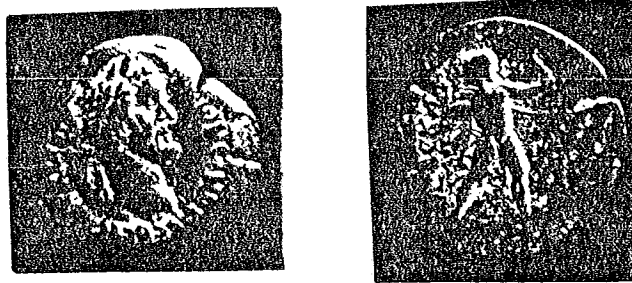


fig. 3



fig. 1



fig. 2



fig. 3



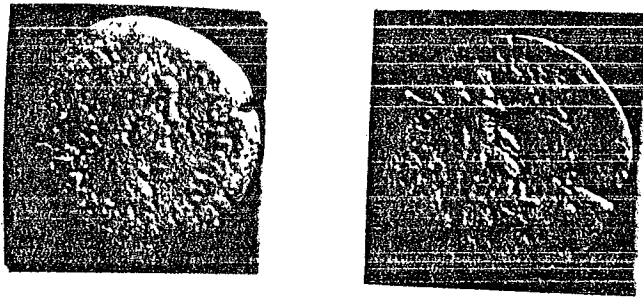


fig. 1

might seem, however, that Soranus, by such recommendation, was thinking of Upper class Roman families who could afford hiring several wet-nurses. (Galen himself recommended in case of a nurse illness to change to another nurse for "the rich have more than one".<sup>21</sup> Yet Soranus' motive was purely medical for he was concerned with the possibility of the nurse falling ill or even dying. The child in this case either would suffer from the strange milk or would reject it completely and might fall to hunger.<sup>22</sup>

Medical recommendation suggest to us that there were many wet-nurses for hiring. Had the situation been different Soranus and Galen would have suggested so. Nor would have Mnesitheus in case of any change in milk quality or quantity first recommended to change to another wet-nurse.<sup>23</sup> Their recommendation, though medically motivated, was influenced by the social conditions in which they lived. Some Greek papyri from Roman Egypt, on the other hand, suggest to us that it was easy to find a baby to nurse. A great number of the nurslings were foundling. In some contracts the nurse (or even the child's owner) was obliged in case of a child's natural death to find another child to nurse,

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<sup>21</sup> Orib., *ibid.*, lib. incert. 16, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Soranus, *ibid.*, II, 12, 20.

<sup>23</sup> Mnesitheus recommends changing to another nurse if milk stops. Yet he admits if this is not possible one should treat the case. Orib. *ibid.*, 15, 17.

to fulfil the terms of the contract.<sup>24</sup> Doctors, nevertheless, considered the less privileged situations when another wet-nurse was not available to hire. They advised for rectifying the damage occurred to the milk. This implies that by following these instructions there would be no need to look for another nurse.

Nursing contracts from Roman Egypt clearly oblige the nurse to nurse only one baby.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, there is no indication that doctors insisted on the same. Soranus, when dealing with the implication of the nurse having large breasts and hence abundant milk, did not make it clear if the norm was to nurse just one baby.

Soranus said: "...while excessively large (breasts) have more than is necessary (milk) so that after nursing if large quantity remains it will be drawn out by the baby when no longer fresh and in some way already spoiled. If, on the other hand, it is all sucked out by other children or other animals, the wet nurse will be exhausted".<sup>26</sup>

However one might infer, reading carefully Soranus' passage, that it was only under this particular circumstance that other children were nursed by the same nurse for it is inconceivable that the nurse nursed animals too. Yet doctors, as has been noted above, recommended employing the nurse who has given birth for forty days to three months earlier. This indicates that the nurse

<sup>24</sup> BGU 1058, 19-22; 1106, 20-26; 1108, 11-12; P. Ryl 178. Herrmann legally differentiates between the two types of contracts by a comparison with other kinds of contracts. Johannes Herrmann, "Die Ammenverträge in den grieco-ägyptischen Papyri", ZSS Röm Abt. 76, 1959, pp. 494-497.

<sup>25</sup> See the section on regimen.

<sup>26</sup> Soranus, *ibid.*, II, 12, 19.

would nurse her child as well as the nursling she was hired for.

Whereas doctors are silent about the place where a baby is best nursed and looked after, Greek papyri from Roman Egypt show that the baby is nursed at the nurse's place.<sup>27</sup> Bradley has maintained that no separation occurred between the mother and her baby as the employed wet-nurse lived in the same household.<sup>28</sup> This could be the case at Rome, but documents from Roman Egypt stand against the general applicability of this inference.

One needs to inquire after the reasons of such meticulous listing of all the qualities a prospective wet-nurse should enjoy. We have suggested above that doctors responded to social needs for listing the qualities of a nurse. Both Tacitus and Aulus Gellius criticized their societies for selecting their nurses at random.<sup>29</sup> Doctors, on the other hand, were interested in helping their society in recognizing the best wet-nurse who could bring their children up. Moreover wet-nursing was as some historians have contended a respectable job for women.<sup>30</sup> A job, one might add, which does not need training or qualification, but a woman with experience of pregnancy, labour and mothering. A woman could work as a nurse beside her original job. The nurse in

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<sup>27</sup> BGU 1106, 10; 1107, 6; 1108, 6; 1109, 7; Aegyptus XIII, p. 565, 11-12.

<sup>28</sup> K. Bradley, Wet-nursing at Rome: A study in social relations, in Rawson's The family in ancient Rome, p. 213.

<sup>29</sup> Etienne, loc. cit., pp. 148-9.

<sup>30</sup> Bradley, loc. cit., pp. 202-3.

P. Oxy 75 defines herself as a grave digger.<sup>31</sup> Yet doctors were aware of the important influence of wet-nursing on children in particular and on the society as a whole. Therefore they took the pain to list the qualities of the nurse to insure a successful child upbringing.

### Regimen

Wet nurses are employed for their milk which seems to be a by-product of their diet.<sup>32</sup> If milk stops or becomes spoiled or thick or thin it is due to a fault in regimen which should be rectified.<sup>33</sup> Therefore Mnesitheus recommended a nurse with a good stomach which should be contented with all kinds of food and not agitated.<sup>34</sup> Doctors prescribed for her a proper diet to

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<sup>31</sup> P. Grenf. 75, 1. Her employer is also a grave digger called Cassianus. He housed and paid four nurses. Yet it is not clear if he employed them for his own services or somebody else, and who could it be?

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle and Rufus of Ephesus maintain that milk is a body secretion. Cf. Abou-Aly, The Medical Writings of Rufus of Ephesus, unpublished thesis, London, 1992, p. 126.

<sup>33</sup> Mnesitheus apud Oribasius, *ibid.*, 15, 20; Rufus, *ibid.*, 13, 22-34; Soranus, *ibid.*, II, 15; Galen, *ibid.*, 16, 3-13. Galen also declares that milk quality depends on the nurse's regimen (De sanitate tuenda, I, 9).

It is interesting to note that Soranus, who is Methodist, follows Hippocrates in using diet as a therapeutic measure. Soranus refuses folklore practice to induce milk in wet-nurses. It is noticeable that the nurse should always be on guard to observe any qualitative change or otherwise in her milk to rectify.

<sup>34</sup> Orib. *ibid.*, 15, 2.

insure healthy milk supply. Diet should be adequate without repletion, nor should it create stomach upset nor constipation.<sup>35</sup> Diet normally consists of exercises, rubbing, anointing, baths (both warm and cold) and certainly food which consists of bread, soup, fish, meat, birds and wine. When the baby grows diet changes. The wet-nurse has to eat particular kinds of food while avoiding others. Exercises should be for all the parts of the body.<sup>36</sup> Soranus differentiated between types of exercises according to the nurse's means<sup>37</sup>, which points at his interest in helping all the social strata which might employ a nurse.

It is surprising to find that both Rufus and Soranus who prohibit employing the drunkard nurse prescribe wine for her diet.<sup>38</sup> Rufus prescribes it to be taken in moderation for its good effect on strength and digestion. It should be neither sweet nor old but in the middle, taken in intervals to clean the milk and improve its quality.<sup>39</sup> Soranus is also meticulous in listing the time of its first introduction in diet, its kind and the

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<sup>35</sup> Rufus apud Oribasius, *ibid.*, 13, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Rufus apud Oribasius, *ibid.*, 13, 6-22; Soranus, *ibid.*, II, 14.

<sup>37</sup> Soranus, II, 14, 24. Bradley maintains that the exercises Soranus prescribes for nurses suggest that they are from humble rank, Bradley, *loc. cit.*, p. 203. Soranus in fact prescribes exercises for all different backgrounds.

<sup>38</sup> Rufus apud Oribasius, *ibid.*, 13, 10; Soranus, *ibid.*, II, 14, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Orib., *ibid.*, 13, 11-12.

period for which it should be drunk.<sup>40</sup> Wine, as we have seen, is prescribed for its good effect on health and milk which benefits the baby. If we look at some of the Greek papyri coming from Roman Egypt we find that the nurse receives her wages in money and oil, while wine is missing.<sup>41</sup> Only in P. Bour. 14, 15 is wine included as one of the nurse's rations.<sup>42</sup> It is then obvious that it is for the nurse. Had it been meant for the baby as well there would have been a clause in the papyri to insure its use for the baby. There would have been also a penalty in case of misuse. It is important to stress that both Rufus and Soranus, unlike Galen, recommended wine for the baby too.<sup>43</sup> It is permitted to infer that people in these contracts did not recognize the value of wine in the nurse's diet or perhaps they left it for her to decide. As for the baby, Greek contracts are utterly silent about the baby's food while being weaned. The

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<sup>40</sup> Wine should be delayed for fear of epileptic convulsions. Soranus, II, 14, 27.

<sup>41</sup> P. Meyer 11, 13-15; P. Cairo Preis. 31 XVI, 75-76; PSI 203, 5; P.Rein. 103, 10-16; 104, 11-14 (oil is no longer legible); BGU 1106, 15-16; 1107, 10-11; 1108, 8-9; 1109, 12-13. In Aegyptus XIII, p. 565. 18-25 oil is for the child. In BGU 1058, 13-15 she is paid money and morsels of dark bread? In P.Tebt. II 399, 3-4; P.Oxy 91, 13-15 she is paid money to cover clothes, oil, attending and other expenses.

<sup>42</sup> Four birds monthly are also mentioned as part of her wages.

<sup>43</sup> Orib., ibid., lib. incert. 20, 19; al-Baladi, Tadbir al-Habala, Ms. Royal College of Physician no.8, Maq. II, bab. 38, 44; Soranus, II, 21, 48; Galen, De sanitate tuenda, I, 11. Soranus warns against its cut during weaning. He in general warns against preventing the child from what he is used to before weaning such as water, cold and hot food, and fatty things. Soranus, II, 21, 46, 48.

nurse could have bought what she liked from her wages especially when there is no clause in any of the contracts against its use by the nurse either for herself or for the baby while being weaned.

### Obligations

The nurse is obliged to abstain from doing several acts. Doctors prohibit her from sleeping with men. Sexual intercourse diminishes, spoils and even suppresses milk as it either induces menstruation (Mnesitheus did not recommend the nurse who had her menses) or leads eventually to conception. It also diverts the nurse's emotions away from the child.<sup>44</sup> Therefore Galen advises his reader to look for another nurse if she gets pregnant or falls ill.<sup>45</sup> Greek contracts from Roman Egypt are explicitly more strict on the nurse as they add more prohibitions. Wet-nurse is prohibited from spoiling her milk, becoming pregnant or nursing another child.<sup>46</sup> Generally she is obliged to look after herself and the nursling with every sense of the words.

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<sup>44</sup> Mnesitheus apud Oribasius, *ibid.*, 15, 5; Rufus, *ibid.*, 13, 19; Soranus, II, 12, 19; Galen, De sanitate tuenda, I, 9.

<sup>45</sup> Galen, De sanitate tuenda, I, 9.

<sup>46</sup> BGU 1058, 27-31; 1106, 28-30; 1107, 13-14; 1108, 14-15; 1109, 17-19. In P.Bour.14, 19-22 the interdiction is against nursing another child and spoiling her milk. The other interdictions are missing perhaps because the fragmentary nature of the papyrus. In the same contract the clause of looking after herself and the child is incomplete. In P.Ryl.178, on the other hand, only the stipulation against pregnancy and nursing another child (1) is there while the others are missing which might be due to the fragmentary nature of the papyrus.



It is obvious that both doctors and laymen were against pregnancy for its effect on the milk. Doctors said it clearly, while it is implicated in the interdiction in contracts. Yet neither of these two parties did discuss the possible use of contraceptives to prevent unwanted pregnancy. Contraceptives were already known in the ancient world. Soranus himself gave lists of them.<sup>47</sup> It might be true that doctors did not discuss the possible use of contraceptives while breast feeding because they were interested in keeping the emotional bond strong between the nurse and the nursling. Or perhaps they did not like to risk any possibility of pregnancy by approving the use of contraceptives during breast feeding. In any case both doctors and laymen were primarily concerned with a continuous flow of healthy milk for the baby.<sup>48</sup> Hence they recommended sexual abstinence and kept silent about the possible use of contraceptives during breast feeding. Before discussing if these regulations were actually observed it is necessary to understand what is meant by the stipulation against spoiling the milk.

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<sup>47</sup> Soranus, I, 19. On other ancient doctors who discussed contraceptives see Keith Hopkins, "Contraception in the Roman Empire", Comparative Studies in Society and History, 8 (1), 1965, 124-151.

<sup>48</sup> Bradley, though he acknowledges the influence of medical opinion, ascribes such regulations to economical motivation. Slave-owners employ nurses for slaves' babies lest work might be interrupted. Nurses, on the other hand, accepted such terms under the pressure of need. Bradley, "Sexual Regulations in Wet-nursing contracts from Roman Egypt", Klio, 62 (2), 1980, pp. 321-5; idem, "wet-nursing at Rome: A study in social relations", in Rawson's The family in ancient Rome, p. 212.

Milk

Doctors discussed the qualities of the nurse's milk. It should be medium in thickness, quantity and froth; sweet in taste and smell; white in colour and smooth in appearance.<sup>49</sup> Soranus believed that there were three ways by which milk is judged: by looking at the nurse and examine her physically as explained above; by looking at the child for if he is in a good condition the milk is then good; and finally by testing the milk. When testing the milk Soranus and Galen consider appearance ( substance), colour, smell, taste and its relative lack of change with time.<sup>50</sup> In addition Oribasius attributes to Mnesitheus four milk tests, one of which is oddly enough to be made in spring. Galen, on the other hand, links milk with blood. Milk decreases because of blood decrease or deterioration which rather means that there should be blood testing to recognize the cause of milk decrease.<sup>51</sup> Yet Oribasius the excerptor did not quote Galen specifying blood testing. This suggests a sophisticated level of medical knowledge.<sup>52</sup> Yet it seems difficult to believe that parents or midwives when first employing the nurse were paying attention to all these medical recommendations, especially when

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<sup>49</sup> Orib., ibid., 15, 9; 16, 1; Soranus, ibid. II, 13, 22; Galen, De sanitate tuenda, I, 9.

<sup>50</sup> Soranus, II, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Orib., ibid., 16, 3-4. If blood decreases one changes the whole diet into humid and warm. If it deteriorates one purges, and uses medicaments. See also Galen, De sanitate tuenda, I, 9.

<sup>52</sup> Oribasius, ibid., 15, 10-14, 16.

we read that Soranus suggested that milk should be tested after the nurse has had a healthy regimen and also after an unhealthy one, for the best milk is that which is not spoiled even by an unhealthy regimen.<sup>53</sup> Soranus' suggestion implies that in the future a doctor or perhaps a midwife should accompany the wet-nurse to check her milk regularly. Or perhaps Soranus is promoting the ideal which is not applicable in reality. An enquiry ought to be undertaken.

We have already noted that the nurse, in some contracts from Roman Egypt, is prohibited from spoiling her milk. As we read through we learn that in some contracts the nurse's milk is described as clean and pure (katharos kai apthoros)<sup>54</sup>, while in others milk is mentioned without further qualifications.<sup>55</sup> The allusion to these milk qualities is significant in itself for it implies a realization of: firstly their importance to child's health, and secondly a possibility of their absence. One must wonder if the nurse's milk in these contracts was really tested to be called clean and pure. However both kinds of contracts do not allude to any kind of milk testing. This might lead us to think that such qualities were either used by the nurse to complement herself or given to her by merely looking at her and her child. Hence when we learn from BGU 1109 that the reason

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<sup>53</sup> Soranus, II, 13, 23.

<sup>54</sup> BGU 1106, 11; 1107, 7; 1108, 7; 1109, 6-7.

<sup>55</sup> P. Rein II 103, 8; 104, 8-9; P. Cairo Preis. 31, V 18; P. Bour. 14, 9.

behind employing a wet-nurse is the spoiling of the milk of the baby's mother due to an illness or weakness, we might infer that the only meaning of mentioned spoiling was in quantity which in itself a sufficient reason for seeking a wet nurse.

Despite all these recommendations concerning milk, it seems that children under their nurses care suffered from emaciation due to hunger or diet to which the proceedings of a lawsuit recorded in P.Oxy 37 allude. An owner of a two year old slave child testified that he had taken the child away from his nurse after the child having emaciated. The nurse claimed that the mentioned child had died whereas the one who had been taken by that person was her own child. So the proceedings went on.

Having discussed the reality of milk testing it is necessary to go back to inquire about the reality of keeping such regulations in the contracts. First of all, contracts comprise penalties against the nurse if she violates any of such regulations. Nevertheless there is no indication of any right of inspection or its method. On the other hand the child's belongings which have been entrusted to the nurse were to be shown to the child's party if requested and a particular penalty was to be inflicted upon her if it appeared that she did not keep them proper unless there was evidence on the wasted.<sup>56</sup> Yet if we read again through some documents we learn that the nurse should bring the child to his owner or parents to be seen for three or

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<sup>56</sup> BGU 1058, 32-36; 1106. 31-35; 1107, 14-16; 1108, 16-17; 1109, 20-22.

four days a month.<sup>57</sup> This could lead us to think, though it is not spelled out, that the child's owner or parents could have the opportunity to check. Yet in other documents this clause is missing and one might be driven to think that the child is totally left at his nurse's home with no supervision. In other words we have penalties for breaking any of these regulations without any specification of the method of inspecting.<sup>58</sup> Moreover there is no evidence of contract breaking due to any of such regulations.

It is now clear that some of such regulations were hard to be observed, let alone be checked, given that nurses did not necessarily live in the same household of the child's parents or owners. If such interdictions were not really observed why were they included in nursing contracts ? Parents and owners of children entrusted nurses with their dears. They needed every kind of legal protection against any transgress from the nurse's part. I agree with Bradley on his suggestion that accepting such stipulations was due to economic strain, yet nurses were aware that there would be no inspection on them. There is no reason for us to believe all these stipulations were really observed.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> EGU 1106, 49-52; 1107, 27-29; 1108, 25-26; 1109, 29-30.

<sup>58</sup> EGU 1058, 37-41; 1106, 35-39; 1107, 19-21; 1108, 18-20; 1109, 23-25; P.Bour.14, 24-27 (yet it lacks the clause of clothes mentioned above in other papyri); P.Ryl.178, 25-30.

<sup>59</sup> Bradley, "Sexual Regulations in wet-nursing contracts from Roman Egypt", Klio, 1980.

### Weaning

A wet-nurse has to wean the baby at a certain age. Soranus believed that it should be when children become firm only when their pores become wide enough to carry solid food, in the third or fourth half-year of the child's age when teeth are grown, in spring season for it is a well-tempered season.<sup>60</sup> Weaning should be gradual starting from six months by increasing solid food and decreasing milk. Soranus prohibited anointing the nipples with bitter materials for its sudden and injurious effect on the baby's stomach. He also prescribed the child's food during weaning.

It is surprising that nursing contracts from Roman Egypt do not oblige the nurse to return the child weaned. Nor is there a discussion of the child's diet during weaning nor an indication of a penalty if a child is returned unweaned. Even in the surviving receipts no evidence is given of handing the child back weaned except for P. Oxy.91 (18-20) when we read that the nurse has returned the child weaned and that he has received every possible care.<sup>61</sup> Moreover we are confronted with a problem of

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<sup>60</sup> It is interesting to note that Rufus, though he agrees with Soranus on the age two as the age proper for weaning, prefers autumn for weaning as it precedes winter which is the best season for digestion. Orib., *ibid.*, 20, 23-24. Soranus rejects autumn for its sudden changes in weather which is the most harmful.

<sup>61</sup> In PSI 203,9 the word *apogegalaktismenon* (weaned) appears but it is difficult to understand the sentence because of the fragmentary nature of the papyrus. In P. Oxy 37, which is a record of the proceedings of a lawsuit filed by a child owner on his ex-nurse and her husband because of the child death, we learn that the nurse received the child after having weaned her own.

estimating the age of weaning. These contracts contain no clear and direct indication of the age proper for weaning. They disagree among themselves on the duration of nursing. Some contracts are for six months while others for three years.<sup>62</sup> A large number is for two years.<sup>63</sup> This disagreement makes it difficult for estimating the average time for nursing and also the age for weaning. This difficulty is increased by our ignorance of the nursling's age when he was first handed to his wet-nurse. Some contracts are also drawn after nursing has already started such as BGU 1110. Other contracts declare that the first six months for breast feeding while the rest of time, which varies from a contract to another, is for attending.<sup>64</sup> Some contracts declare without specification of duration that the purpose of hiring the wet-nurse is milk feeding and attending the child.<sup>65</sup> In other words we are ignorant of the child age when he returns back to his family. In short it is difficult to gather absolute information from these contracts or receipts concerning weaning. Yet it seems possible to argue that, given that

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<sup>62</sup> P.Meyer 11, 11; P.Tebt.II 399,4.

<sup>63</sup> P.Bour.14,9; PSI 203, 4; P. Rein.103, 8-9; 104, 9-10; BGU 1058,8.

<sup>64</sup> BGU 297; P.Cairo Preis. 31 V 22. Herrmann draws the attention to P. Ross. Georg.II 18 XVI 72 (Herrmann, loc. cit., f.n. 25, p. 493).

<sup>65</sup> Some documents clearly state that the purpose for hiring the nurse is to suckle or serve as a wet-nurse (BGU 1058, 1106, 1107, 1108, 1109, 1112, 1153. I; P. Ryl 342; P. Cairo. Preis. 31 v; P. Rein. II, 103, 104; Aegyptus XIII p. 564 f.; P.Bour. 14; PSI 203, 1065; P.Meyer 11.

contracts for two years outnumber the other types of contracts, two years was then the usual age for weaning.

### Conclusion

Greek doctors were interested in helping their societies in recognizing the best wet-nurse to hire. They wrote on nurse selection, regimen and duties. They were also interested in keeping both the nurse and the child healthy. Therefore they recommended several measures to be followed to insure healthy milk supply for the nursling. Their medical recommendations corresponded in some ways with nursing contracts from Roman Egypt. Both were interested in mentioning the nurse's age, her milk and her duties. Yet nursing contracts were more strict on the nurse in adding more prohibitions. However prohibitions concerning sexual behaviour, milk spoiling and nursing just one nursling were hard to be regularly observed, let alone be inspected. They were included by parents and child owners to protect their rights over nurses.



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