

Mothers & Children in the Art of Ancient Italy

The statue type “kourotrophos” (mother holding or nursing a child or children) is widely distributed in Ancient Italy but not frequent in Ancient Greece, perhaps because of taboos on certain types of nudity.

By 1000 BC (Villanovan culture) the Etruscans are already in Italy, their writing (non-Indo-European) by 800 BC. The Etruscans probably came into Italy not in one massive wave but over a long period of time, with a consequent merger with the Italic peoples (Indo-European) already there. The Indo-Europeans that migrated to Italy were part of the larger movement of I-E peoples brought a sky-father religion that came into contact with the female earth divinities of the earlier peoples. In Greece the result was a marrying off of the female divinities to the I-E male divinities and a consequent diminished role for those female divinities in Greece as compared to those in Italy. (In Italy there was a multi-mix of languages but a basic unity of thought and religion.)

The Etruscans taught the Italians to write and to represent the human figure. A pair of nude figures from Latium (c. 750 BC) shows a woman nursing a baby and a man having his eyes pecked out by birds (Aphrodite and Anchises, in some unknown variant?). This representation of husband and wife together is part of a general Italian tendency to show family relationships.

A large (headless) statue from Syracuse shows a woman, wearing a robe which leaves her breasts exposed, nursing 2 babies (perhaps a mother who died in childbirth?). From Veii comes an over-life-size terracotta standing woman (Leto with Apollo in her arms as she runs from Python), her large hands (as often in Etruscan art) protecting a baby.

Between 400 and 150 there are thousands of nursing mother statues, especially votive statuettes, dedications to a goddess. The type is similar to Greek models, but the baby is added.

A bronze mirror shows Hera nursing a full-grown and bearded Heracles, a formal adoption scene witnessed by 4 gods, including Apollo and Poseidon. The inscription confirms that this is an adoption, Hera finally receiving Heracles after harrowing him through his mortal life.

A terracotta statuette from Pompeii showing a young mother nursing her old father (perhaps Pero and Micon) typifies the Caritas Romana, Roman Charity, echoed later by Caravaggio and other Baroque artists.

The foot of a bronze box shows a small boy nursed by a lioness, who looks protectively back at the child. The scene is similar to the famous Etruscan wolf (a tomb guardian) seen in coins and reliefs. The Etruscans adopted Greek myths, but often with humor, as in a plate that shows Pasiphae with a baby Minotaur.

Many of the sanctuaries have simple small terracottas of babies or body parts (mainly breasts or uteri) or couples. At Capua, in the sanctuary of the goddess addressed as Damia, the styles were quite different: very broad women, some very rudimentary or rough. And from Gaul came small statuettes (and the moulds from which they were made) showing kourotrophoi with pairs of tiny fetus-like nursing babies.

Who were the goddesses of whom these dedications were made? Ishtar is the best example of a naked goddess. A bi-lingual inscription on 3 gold tablets found at Pyrgi in 1964 says, in Etruscan and

Phoenician, "dedicated by the king to Uni (=Hera)-Ishtar because the goddess has held him in her hand for 3 years". There are also dedications to Aphrodite (Venus), Demeter, and Hera, as well as to other mother goddesses.

A few Roman examples: the Ara Pacis of Augustus preserves the Italian tradition with its female figure (probably = Tellus, "Earth") with 2 babies; she is not nursing the babies at the moment, but her gown is coming off and nursing looks imminent. On a Roman sarcophagus showing the life of a child, the first thing depicted is a kourotrophos. Funerary stelae of Roman soldiers often show the family unit, wives and children.

In Greece, scenes of children are not as frequent outside of funerary representations. Sometimes the representation is father and child, sometimes mother and child, but the contact is more through the eyes than through nursing or even touching. Such nursing scenes as do exist are Aphrodite and Eros. Adoption scenes are shown simply by a child (especially Dionysos) being handed over; the lady normally has a wet-nurse at hand.

Why did the Greeks not show kourotrophoi? Rich ladies may not have wanted to spoil their figures. Nurses were normally shown as ugly. Lower class women nurse children (in medieval and renaissance art it's wild women) or else the figures are allegorical. In Greece, the life of a woman was more private so you do not show mothers and children often. Perhaps the greater prominence of mother goddesses in Italy provided a religious reason for Italian kourotrophoi. Perhaps a sense of magic was involved in shocking/powerful mages; the exposure of the breasts was too important in Greek life to be shown in art. This magical use (often apotropaic) may have been akin to Clytemnestra's attempt to prevent Orestes from killing her; she exposed to him the breasts that nursed him.