

Breastfeeding Animals and Other Wild “Nurses” in Greek and Roman Mythology

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ABSTRACT

Both literary and material evidence strongly suggest that wet and dry nurses played a central role within the ancient world. A peculiar declination of the figure of the Greek and Roman wet-nurse are animal nurses, recalled by both literary texts and iconography. There are plenty of ancient legends concerning abandoned children breastfed by animals, such as Romulus, Telephus, and Zeus. These breastfeeding animals can be ascribed to the category of the “adjuvant” that is central in the myths concerning the biography of divine and legendary founders and kings. Adjuvants can be animals, either domestic or wild, or human beings, and mostly figures socially excluded belonging to specific social groups: shepherds, swineherds, washerwomen, slaves and even prostitutes. They could be also nymphs who live, like animals, in natural habitats (where babies are usually abandoned). Our aim is to suggest that those babies with an extraordinary future in front of them inherit something from their animal and/or wild nurses via milk.

Keywords: Animal breastfeeding. Nurses. Mothering. Greek and Roman mythology.

Animales amamantando y otras “nodrizas” salvajes en la mitología griega y romana

RESUMEN

Los testimonios materiales y literarios sugieren que nodrizas y niñeras jugaron un papel crucial en el mundo antiguo. Un peculiar declive de la figura de la nodriza griega y romana lo representa la figura del animal lactante, recordado en los textos literarios y en la iconografía. Existen numerosas leyendas a propósito de niños abandonados y amamantados por animales, como Rómulo, Telephus y Zeus. Estos animales nutricios se pueden adscribir a la categoría del “auxiliar” (el que auxilia), una imagen central en los mitos que conciernen a la biografía de fundadores, divinos y legendarios, y reyes. Auxiliares pueden ser animales, domésticos o salvajes, o seres humanos, y sobre todo figuras socialmente marginadas por la pertenencia a grupos sociales específicos y de baja consideración: pastores, porquerizos, lavanderas, esclavos e incluso prostitutas. Incluso pueden aparecer las ninfas que viven, como los animales, en hábitats naturales (donde los bebés por lo general son abandonados). Nuestro objetivo es sugerir que aquellos bebés con un futuro extraordinario ante ellos heredan algo animal y/o salvaje de sus nodrizas, que se transmite a través de la leche.

Palabras clave: Amamantamiento animal. Niñeras. Nodrizas. Maternidad. Mitología griega y romana.

Contents: 1. Babies suckled by animals in the Greek and Roman lore: an overview. 2. Nature and function of the so-called “adjuvant”. 3. Nature and function of the *lacte ferino*. 4. Conclusions.

1. Babies suckled by animals in the Greek and Roman lore: an overview

Both literary and material evidence strongly suggest that wet and dry nurses played a central role within the ancient world.¹ A particular declination of the figure of the Greek and Roman wet-nurse is represented by animal nurses. Indeed, there are plenty of ancient legends –also outside the Greek and Roman worlds– concerning abandoned children that are rescued, breastfed and raised by animals.²

The most famous ones are the legendary founders of Rome –the twins Romulus and Remus– who were portrayed as having been raised by a she-wolf, which suckled the infants, after they were abandoned in the Tiber in a basket, stopped by the roots of a fig tree. The fig tree where the she-wolf found them was the so-called *Ficus Ruminalis*, possibly from *ruma*=female breast: see the goddess Rumina, connected with breastfeeding. Indeed, Servius seems to suggest that the fig tree itself could have fed milk to the twins³. Here is the antecedent: Amulius, after having deposed his brother Numitor in Alba Longa, was told he would be deposed by a successor of Numitor. He had only one daughter Silvia, who was forced by her uncle to become a vestal. But she was raped by Mars and she became pregnant with the twins. The twins were exposed to the elements and the rest of the story is universally known. Then they were raised by the swineherd Faustulus and his wife, Acca Laurentia.⁴

¹ This paper was delivered in the International Congress “Human-Animal Relationships in Religious Traditions”, held in Bonn on September 25-27, 2014. PEDRUCCI 2013, 60-66, 240-250; PEDRUCCI – SCAPINI forthcoming (both with previous bibliography); GHERCHANOC 2015. For material evidence, see HADZISTELIOU PRICE 1978. We should keep in mind that the Greek substantive *trophe*, nurse in its widest sense, comes from the verb *trephe*, meaning to rear, to educate, to help children in “taking form”; secondly, to breastfeed. See DEMONT 1978. It is worth noting in this respect that the Latin word for nurse is *nutrix* that, according to Ernout and Meillet, is directly connected with the idea of nurture, specifically with breastmilk. The correspondent noun in ancient Greek language would be *tiithe* or *tithene*, which are never used for deities, unlike *nutrix*. The *nutrix* is often called *alma*; the one under her care is said *alumnus/alumna*: both derive from *alo*, to feed.

² PROPP 1975, 107. This narrative scheme is extremely widespread, see i.e. Tarzan or Mowgli, see PELLIZER 1991, 20. To remain closer to the ancient world, MCCARTNEY 1925, 20, mentions an Etruscan grave-stone showing a child suckled perhaps by a lion. *Contra* HÉRITIER-AUGÉ 1993, 132-135: She states that this narrative pattern is present only in the Greek, Roman and Indian (North America) mythology. She also noted that baby-boys are always involved (except Atalanta, Cybele, see below, and an Indian case). In her opinion, the sex of the baby-boy can “ennoble” the animal nurse, making her change her status. Cf. below note 27.

³ Serv., *Aen.*, VIII 90. This detail seems to be confirmed in some coins, see *The de Wit Collection*, 41. For the importance of the fig tree in the Roman culture and its connection with breastfeeding, see COSTANTINI – COSTANTINI BIASINI 1989, 64. According to Aristotle and Pliny (*HA*, III 11 523a; *NH*, XXII 63f.), the juice was used to curdle milk. Indeed, the fig tree was not the only tree associated with breastfeeding, see AUBERGER 2001, 144. More generally speaking, it was also associated with fecundity and regeneration, see NIZZO 2015, 7-9. In the Egyptian documentation, we find an example of a tree who suckles a human being, see Thoutmôsis III (XVIII Dynasty) TombKV34, Valley of the Kings, on-line: http://www.thebanmappingproject.com/sites/browse_tombimages_848_60.html.

⁴ Liv., 1.4; Varr., *LL*, V 54; Serv., *Aen.*, I 273; VIII 90; Fest., *s.u. Romulus, Ruminalis*; Plin., *NH*, XV 20; Cic., *De re publ.*, II 2; Ov., *Fast.*, III 1ff.; Plut., *Rom.*, 4; *Quaest. Rom.*, 35; *De fort. Rom.*, 8; Macrob., I 10.17; Gell., VII 7.8; *Origo gentis Rom.*, XX. There is an interesting parallelism between Romulus and Remus and the *Lares praestites*, the public ancestors: they are all twins “adopted” by Acca Laurentia and sons of a raped virgin (of the nymph Lara and Mercury, see Ov., *Fast.*, II 610-16). See MASTROCINQUE 1993, 136. As Dominique BRIQUEL (1976) pointed out, the theme of divine twins is very common among Indo-European people. He analysed how Greeks and Romans elaborated differently on this “archetype” (in his opinion, they developed a narrative pattern in which only mortal or divinized heroes are involved, not gods). Interestingly,

The Greek god Zeus was said to have been brought up by Amalthea, portrayed variously as a goat who suckled the god, or as a nymph who brought him up on the milk of her goat.⁵ Subsequently, he comes back to depose his father Chronus (as was predicted). According to a late version of the myth,⁶ Zeus was fed by a swarm of bees, which also fed Meliteus, founder of Melite.⁷ Iamus, son of Apollo, was also fed with honey, but two serpents gave it to him.⁸ He became the founder of a family of seers, the Iamidae. In absence of his mother, Zeus was also provided with ambrosia by doves,⁹ with nectar by an eagle,¹⁰ was suckled by a sow.¹¹

Similarly, Telephus (his name might come from the noun *thelé*, woman breast, nipple),¹² the son of Heracles, was suckled by a deer. Aleus, king in Tegea and father of Auge, had been told by an oracle that he would be overthrown by his grandson. So, according to varying myths, he forced Auge to become a virgin priestess of Athena. She was violated by Heracles when she had this role. Although the infant Telephus was hidden in the temple, his cries revealed his presence and Aleus ordered that the child be exposed on Mt. Parthenion. The child was suckled by a doe through the agency of Heracles. According to another version, Aleus ordered the pregnant girl to be drowned, but she escaped and gave birth to Telephus in a little wood. Then she hid the baby in a bush, and a deer suckled him and some shepherds rescued him and brought him to their king Corycus, who raised Telephus. Once he became an adult, he wanted to know who his mother was and, therefore, he went to Delphos, where he was told to go to Mysia to the king Teuthras. During a war, Teuthras had promised Auge (who was sold as a slave) to the whoever defeated his enemy. Telephus succeed in this, but Auge recognised him and told him the truth of his birth. Teuthras decided to adopt him, when he died Telephus became king of Mysia. After Telephus's death, his nephew Grinos, a close friend of Pergamus, Neoptolemus's son, founded in Mysia Pergamum, whose origin was closely connected to the memory of Telephus.

the divine twins are often exposed and rescued by animals: Lycastus and Parrhasios (she-wolf); Phylacides and Phylander (goat); Pelias and Neleus (cow and bitch); Aeolus and Beotus, see below. Twins are extraordinary, powerful but ambiguous creatures. Giving birth to more than one creature is typical of animals, not of humans. Twinning is located between human and animal nature, marriage law and sexual anarchy (no one can be sure about the father/s in case of twins: do they have one or two or even more fathers?). The original ambiguity belongs always to the mother. On the other hand, twins represent a wonder, a *monstrum*, which often implies the contribution of a deity: they symbolize divine powerful fertility and, more in general, the power of nature. All these aspects are important in order to reach our conclusions. See: MCCARTNEY 1925, 19, 21f. (for ancient sources); HÉRITIER-AUGÉ 1993, 129ff.; MENCACCI 1996, 18f., 25, 35, 39, 43; MEURANT 2004.

⁵ For instance: Callim., *H.*, 1,34-49; Diod., V 70.2. See more in MCCARTNEY 1925, 17, n. 7.

⁶ Ant. Lib., 19.2. Many variants exist regarding Zeus's birth, see ANDÒ 1996, n. 106.

⁷ Ant. Lib., 13.1f.

⁸ Pi., *O.*, VI 44ff. Hieron II Syracuse and perhaps Pindar had the same destiny, see MCCARTNEY 1925, 24.

⁹ Hom., *Od.*, XII 83.

¹⁰ Athen., 491B.

¹¹ Athen., 376A. And perhaps by a cow and a sheep. See MCCARTNEY 1925, 17. In this article, one can find an extremely detailed list of sources concerning animal-nursed infant in Greek and Roman lore, also for all the other examples mentioned in the present work.

¹² PELLIZER 1997, 87. Main sources: Apollod., II 7.4; Hyg., *Fab.*, 99, 252. Ael., *VH*, XII 42, makes a quick list: Cyrus (bitch), Telephus (deer), Pelias and Alope (mare), Paris (she-bear), Aegistus (goat).

Aeolus and Beotus (Boiotos), sons of Melanippe, were exposed by king Desmotic, but were suckled by a cow before becoming the eponymous heroes of Aeolia and Boeotia.¹³ Hippothoon, eponym of the Athenian *phyle* called Hippothoontis, was suckled by a mare. Poseidon seduced Alope, his granddaughter through Cercyon, and from the union she gave birth to Hippothoon. Alope left the infant in the open to die of exposure, but a passing mare suckled the child until it was found by shepherds, who fell into a dispute as to which one of them should have the beautiful royal attire of the boy. The case was brought before Cercyon who, by the dress recognized whose child the boy was, and ordered Alope to be imprisoned and put to death, and her child exposed again. The latter was fed and found in the same manner as before, and the shepherds called him Hippothoon.¹⁴ Both Boiotos and Hippothoon derive their name from their animal nurses.¹⁵

Miletus, founder of the homonymous city, was the son of Apollo and Areia, daughter of Cleochus, of Crete. When Areia gave birth to her son, she hid him in a bed of smilax; Cleochus found the child there and named him Miletus, after the plant. Another tradition relates that Miletus’s mother by Apollo was Akakallis, the daughter of Minos. Fearing her father’s wrath, she exposed the child, but Apollo commanded a few she-wolves to come down and nurse the child.¹⁶

Asclepius was the son of Apollo and a human woman, Coronis. His mother was killed for being unfaithful to Apollo and was laid out on a funeral pyre to be consumed, but the unborn child was rescued from her womb. Apollo carried the baby to the centaur Chiron who raised Asclepius and instructed him in the art of medicine. It is said that in return for some kindness rendered by Asclepius, a snake licked Asclepius’s ears clean and taught him secret knowledge. Asclepius became so proficient as a healer that he surpassed both Chiron and his father, Apollo. Asclepius was therefore able to evade death and to bring others back to life from the brink of death and beyond (for this reason he was killed by Zeus). According to Pausanias he was suckled by a goat, while the sheepdog was supervising; according to Festus and Lactantius, he was suckled by a bitch (or nourished on dog’s milk).¹⁷

Even Heracles, the most famous Greek and Roman hero, had some kind of animal *trophos*, even if he was not breastfed by her (he was not breastfed at all¹⁸ if we exclude the variant of the suckling by Hera):¹⁹ the weasel, identified with Galanthis or

¹³ Hyg., *Fab.*, 186.

¹⁴ Hyg., *Fab.*, 187.

¹⁵ See the following note.

¹⁶ Schol. Apoll. Rhodius, *Arg.*, I 186; Ant. Lib., *Met.*, 30. There are many heroes suckled by she-wolves, i.e. *Parrhasius* and *Lycastus* (twins) or *Wolfdietrich* in the German folklore (*Lycastus* and *Wolfdietrich* also inherit their name after the wolf, *lykos* means wolf in ancient Greek). It is also worth recalling the ancestor of the Turks. See: PRECIADO-SOLIS 1984, 44; MCCARTNEY 1925, 19, 28f., 38 (he mentioned the fact that cases of wolf-reared children have been authenticated in India); CANTARELLA 2011, 277-280 (for *Lycastus*).

¹⁷ Paus., II 26, 4; Fest., *s.u. In insula*; Lact., *Divin. Ist.*, I 10. Cf. Pi., *P.*, III 5ff.

¹⁸ Except Theoc., *Id.*, XXIV 2.

¹⁹ Probably a sort of adaptation ritual, based on the hemogenesis of maternal milk.

Galanthia (*galé* means weasel in ancient Greek) which helped his mother in giving birth to him.²⁰

Habis, king of Tartessos, was exposed five times by his grandfather, each time in a different wild place (including the ocean), but each time he was rescued by animals and breastfed by them (pigs, hind, doe). His salvation was attributed to the gods and he was restored in the position of prince. Thanks to him, barbarian people learnt law and agriculture.²¹

To make one example from outside the classical world, in the Scandinavian mythology, Ymir, progenitor of the Giants, was suckled by a wonderful cow, Audhumla, whose milk could give him an incredible strength. Audhumla became the nurse for his entire race.

Mythological and Legendary Characters	
• Romulus & Remus	she-wolf/Rome
• Zeus	goat/Olympic kingdom
• Meliteus*	bees/Melite
• Telephus	deer/(Pergamum)
• Aeolus & Boeotus(Boiotos)*	cow/Aeolia & Boeotia
• Hippothoon*	mare/ <i>phyle</i> Hippothoontis
• Miletus	she-wolves/Miletus
• Asclepius	goat/(medicine)
• Habis/Habia	pigs/hind/doe/(law & agriculture)
• Dionysus	goat

* indicates babies that derives their names from their animal “nurses”

Even if we have chosen to focus especially on divine and heroic figures, it is worth recalling that several famous ancient historical figures claimed to have been suckled by animals as well: Cyrus I of Persia,²² abandoned in a wood by Astyages, his incestuous grandfather, was said to have been suckled by a bitch (or by a woman called bitch, *Spakò*, *Spàka=kùna*, which can indicate the prostitute in ancient Greek lan-

²⁰ BETTINI 1998, 36ff. See: Ov., *Met.*, IX, 281-323; Ant. Lib., *Met.*, 29; Ael., *NA*, XII 5. The weasel was also associated with Hekate, a goddess connected with childbirth. Hekate herself, exposed as a child, was found and raised by some herdsmen, see: Schol. Theoc. 2.35-6a Wendel; Schol. Lyc. 1180 (Scheer 2 p. 341).

²¹ Iust., XLIV 4. More details in McCARTNEY 1925, 17f. Gilgamesh was rescued by an eagle (*trophos*) after his grand-father’s attempt to kill him because of a prophecy, see Ael., *NA*, XII 21.

²² Hdt., I.110; Iust., I 4; Porph., *Abst.*, III 17; Ael., *VH*, XII 42.

guage),²³ while mares supposedly suckled Croesus, Xerxes and Lysimachus;²⁴ Midas was nurtured by ants.²⁵

Moreover, a very interesting variant is one in which the role of the suckling animal is taken over by a human character who is, for different reasons, close to animals. One example is the case of Silvius, king of Alba Longa and eponymous of the *gens Silvia*. Here is his story: after his death Aeneas (who was breastfed by nymphs, by the way)²⁶ left two wives, one Trojan and one Latin. The first one had a son, Ascanius, who inherited the kingdom after his father’s death, while, the second one, Lavinia, was pregnant with Silvius. She was afraid that Ascanius would harm her son (although in this case her fear was unrealized); and therefore gave him to a swineherd who hid Silvius in the woods, and raised him.

Historical Characters	
• Cyrus I of Persia	bitch/prostitute
• Croesus	mare
• Xerxes	mare
• Lysimachus	mare
• Hiero of Syracuse	apes
• Gordio	birds
• Midas	ants

It is not possible to list all the stories concerning babies rescued and suckled by animals. Eugene McCartney²⁷ sums up his research on this theme with the following words: “In my collection from Greek and Latin sources there are almost forty

²³ The same pattern is seen in the tale of Romulus and Remus, see BETTINI – BORGHINI 1979, 124ff. The prostitute is seen as a mediator between nature and culture since she does not respect the marriage law, see also BETTINI – BORGHINI 1979, 126. We have another very interesting detail: being a woman working with her body, the wet-nurse was perceived as a prostitute too, see MEDINA QUINTANA 2010.

²⁴ RADBILL 1976, 23

²⁵ Cic., *De Div.*, I 36; Val. Max., I 6ext3; Ael., *VH*, XII 45.

²⁶ *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, 256-258. See also Achilles, Apoll. Rhodius, IV 813.

²⁷ MCCARTNEY 1925, 27f. He also takes into account not-literary sources. Besides, he gives many examples of attempts to rationalize these stories.

instances of children nurtured or protected by animals and two of gods. In five of these cases twins are exposed. All the children are male except Cybele, Camilla, Semiramis,²⁸ Atalanta, Harpalice and Chloe. In nine accounts the gods Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo, Mars and Hermes are the reputed father. Among many wild animals serving as attendants are wolves, bears, panthers, lions and deer; among domestic animals, goats, horses, cows, sheep, dogs and pigs; among birds, doves, eagles and woodpeckers, among insects, bees. Fish and serpents are not listed. It will thus be seen that the animal nurses are not restricted to mammals. Although the rescuers are not always mentioned, it is stated in thirteen cases that shepherds found the infants. Of the children exposed several are eponymous heroes, namely Romulus, Aeolus, Boeotus, Miletus, Iamus, Damascus and Cydon [...] The ancients themselves were struck by the parallelism of these stories. There is not to my knowledge any kind of folk-tale which they tried so hard to explain”.

2. Nature and function of the so-called “adjuvant”

Maurizio Bettini and Alberto Borghini,²⁹ fifty years later, have singled out the main elements of stories concerning the biography of god-kings and god-founders.³⁰ In fact, the narrative pattern is always the same: the threat of cruel men who exposes the baby to the elements, often after a revelation preceding the birth (oracles or dreams); an adjuvant provided with specific characteristics who rescues the baby from the threats of nature (perceived as a dangerous space); the hero-god who, once become an adult, will defeat the enemies, founding a new era and a new political equilibrium. The so-called adjuvant has a fundamental role. It can be an animal, either domestic (goats, cows, dogs, bees, etc.) or wild, but in some ways close to men and familiar with them (wolf, woodpecker: both were particularly honoured by Romans, they

²⁸ It might be interesting to note that doves brought milk to the baby, see Diod., II 4.4. For Cybele and Camilla, see below.

²⁹ BETTINI–BORGHINI 1979, 12. Cf.: PELLIZER 1991, 110-123; *Id.* 1997. See also HUYS 1995, for the tale of the exposed hero in Euripidean tragedies, with a very useful list of exposed-hero tales according to the collection of Gerhard Binder and enlarged with a supplement (pages 377-394) and a table of divine or semi-divine children rescued by animals (divided into domestic, above all goats, wild, above all wolves, and birds, page 398). For the tale of abandoned children rescued by animals, see in particular pages 271-299. As concern Euripides, he must have described the suckling of Telephus by a doe in his *Auge* (cf. Sophocles, *Aleadae* fragment 89, Lloyd-Jones, *Sophocles Fragments*, pages 40-41) and also in the *Alexandros* there was likely a reference to Paris’s suckling by a she-bear. The motif of the exposed child nursed by animal was present in the *Alope* and in the *Melanippe Sophe*, where it was combined with that of respectful behaviour by herd-animals. The negative side of this motif is principally known to us through its development in the *Ion*, apart from its brief mention in some lines of the *Phoinissai*.

³⁰ In some tales, on the other hand, the baby is not a founder, but a destroyer. Paris, for example, who was breastfed by a she-bear (like Atalanta, see Ael., *VH*, XIII 1), or Oedipus, raised by a shepherd; see BETTINI – BORGHINI 1979, 137-153. In these cases, what makes the difference is the role of a wrong woman (cf. Oedipus vs. Telephus. Cf. also Aegisthus was raised by shepherds and suckled by a goat, hence his name Aegisthus, from *aix*, buck) and his union with Clytemnestra. See Hyg., *Fab.*, 87, 88; Ael., *VH*, XII 42. Romulus is not a completely good character as well. We could also find a similar tale-pattern in the life of Jesus, see BETTINI – BORGHINI 1979, 134.

were connected to each other,³¹ to Mars³² and to breastfeeding or, more generally speaking, to feeding);³³ or a human being belonging to specific social groups: shepherds, swineherds, washerwomen³⁴ and even prostitutes (it is worth recalling that a popular Latin word used to indicate prostitutes was *lupa*. In a different version, Acca Laurentia was a prostitute.³⁵ An Estonian legend tells of a she-wolf, which used to breastfeed a crying baby in the wood, but then they found out she was his mother dressed up like the animal). All these characters have in common the liminal position between the civilized and uncivilized world. Giuseppe Pucci also puts the fig tree among the adjuvants.³⁶ The fig is a fruit generally connected with fertility and, probably because of its white juice, more specifically to breastfeeding. The woodpecker is often represented on the tree in Roman art.

It could be also –we would like to add– a nymph who lives, like the animals, in natural habitats (where babies are usually abandoned), neither mortal nor immortal.³⁷ Moreover, nymphs are curatrophic and liminal characters and creature fundamentally ambiguous, like nurses (they can breastfeed, they raise children and they assist them during the passage from childhood to adult life).³⁸ Dionysus represents a very particular case: a creature extraordinarily ambiguous, foreigner and marginalized, he was born twice, once from his father, was reared by nymphs, in some late variants was possibly suckled by a goat,³⁹ he came back to invert the established order.⁴⁰

³¹ BETTINI – BORGHINI 1979, 127. Hirpini and Picenes derive their name from these two animals. The friendly animal usually plays a fundamental role in myths concerning foundations of new populations. The pattern is not very different from that of stories of exposed babies, see BETTINI – BORGHINI 1979, 128.

³² Plaut., *Truc.*, 657; Liv., X 27.9; XXII 1.12; Cic., *De Div.*, I 12.20; Hor., *Carm.*, I 17.9; Verg., *Aen.*, IX 565; Prop., IV 1.55; Serv., *Aen.*, I 273; II 355; Sil. It., VII 718; Serv., *Aen.*, I 273, II 355; Avien., *Arat.*, 1854; Ov., *Fast.*, III 37; Plin., *NH*, XXV 10; *Origo gentis Rom.*, XX 4; Plut., *De fort. Rom.*, 8; Dion. Hal., I 14.5; Aug., *Civ. Dei*, XVIII 15.

³³ Cf.: Ov., *Fast.*, III 37; Plut., *Rom.*, 4; *Quaest. Rom.*, 21; *Origo gentis Rom.*, XX 4.

³⁴ This is the case of Moses, abandoned in a craft on the river Nile.

³⁵ Liv., I 4. For the prostitute, see note 23.

³⁶ PUCCI 2010, 212. In classical mythology, there is another tree with “maternal” features: Myrrha. She falls in love with her father Cinyras and tricks him into sexual intercourse. After discovering her identity, Cinyras draws his sword and pursues Myrrha. She flees across Arabia and, after nine months, turns to the gods for help. They take pity on her and transform her into a myrrh-tree. While in plant form, Myrrha gives birth to Adonis. Attis was tended by a he-goat (Paus., VII 17.11). In Salustius’s opinion (*De diis et mundo*, IV 9), he needed milk because he was a reborn human being, and Cybele, according to Diodorus (III 58f.), was suckled by leopards and other ferocious beasts. The new-born is a boy with an extraordinary destiny. According to Ovid (*Met.*, X 298ff.), Aphrodite will fall in love with him, and, in this way, he will revenge his mother. Persephone falls in love with him, too. Neither Aphrodite nor Persephone wanted to give him up; therefore he had to stay part of the year with the first one, part with the second one. Consequently, he was associated with death and rebirth.

³⁷ *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, 259-63.

³⁸ PEDRUCCI 2013. Their ambiguous nature is also evident in some inscriptions concerning children prematurely dead, who were kidnapped by nymphs. In fact, they take away children from their inconsolable parents, but they take care of them (because of their well known role as *kourotrophoi* of divine or semi-divine children) and they assure them a sort of sweet death, in some way a “non-death” (almost a divinisation). See FABIANO 2014.

³⁹ At least according to BERNABÉ 2013, 61f., who quotes the *Supplementum Hellenisticum* 1045. Porph., *Abst.*, III 17, lists all the gods breastfed by animals and he mentions Dionysus.

⁴⁰ See Euripidean *Bacchae* below.

Such mediators share a fundamental aspect: they have a strong trait of marginality, holding a position between nature and culture, or, to say it in a better way, between a previous barbarian state (associated with wild nature) and a following civilized state (associated with friendly nature).⁴¹ Since they are “marginal” –but not hostile!– by definition, mediators appear close to abandoned babies, that is creatures socially excluded (by both men and gods) *par excellence*. Like mediators, abandoned babies belong to both the natural and cultural world. Mediators and abandoned babies are able to connect these different spheres, and build a bridge between them. According to the ancients, children in general –not only new-born children abandoned in the wild– were perceived as *petites animaux*.⁴² Such an “animality” was considered on par with the marginal status –and often servile status– of people who generally take care of children and sometimes breastfeed them in myths (but also in real life).⁴³ Indeed, breastfeeding puts human and animal nature on the same plane: an extraordinary lasting tradition ascribed breastfeeding to a primitive, savage and villain dimension.⁴⁴ It is sufficient to recall the Euripidean *Bacchae* (vv. 700-74), led by Agave, one of the former Dionysus’s nurses. Such frenzied women, roaming in the woods of

⁴¹ BETTINI – BORGHINI 1979, 128. At page 132 the two authors offer a scheme based on strong and weak oppositions: “la *barbarie* (strong, Amulius) di un tiranno fa esporre un bambino nella *natura selvaggia* (weak, the river), ma un elemento appartenente alla *natura amica* (weak, the she-wolf) [...] riporta il bambino alla cultura, permettendogli così di formare una nuova *civiltà* (strong, Rome)”.

⁴² VILATTE 1991, 20; VEGETTI 1994 (on the proximity between babies and animals, and slaves and barbarians in Aristotle).

⁴³ ANDÒ 1996, 75. Roberto LIONETTI (1984, 111) in his study on the *lactatio mascula*, underlines the fact that those men, who can breastfeed poor or abandoned children especially in times of famine, are usually liminal and marginal figures, such as lumberjacks, poor people or even saints or heroes. The narrative pattern seems to be the same; ambiguity (including sexual ambiguity) is a *conditio sine qua non* to carry out their task.

⁴⁴ Human–animal breastfeeding has been practised in many different cultures in many different eras. The practice of suckling between humans and other species has gone in both directions: human females sometimes breastfeed young animals, and animals are used to suckle babies. Animals were used as substitute wet-nurses, particularly after the rise of syphilis. Goats and donkeys were widely used to feed abandoned babies in foundling hospitals in 18th and 19th century Europe. Suckling directly was probably preferable to milking an animal and drinking the milk, as contamination by microbes during the milking process could lead to the infant contracting deadly diarrheal diseases. Stored animal milk, in fact, only became safe to drink after the invention of pasteurisation and sterilisation. Breastfeeding animals has also been used to drain a woman’s breasts, to promote lactation, to develop good nipples, to prevent conception, to draw off the milk in case of puerperal fever, to dislodge nodules from breasts, etc. – or for religious and cultural purposes (middle 18th century). According to ancient physicians, colostrum was not suitable for infants, therefore after the birth both promoting lactation and draining breasts were plausibly problematic. A wide variety of animals has been used for this purpose, including puppies, kittens, piglets and monkeys. The belief that animal characteristics could be transmitted via milk was widely held; the Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus thought that being suckled by lionesses conferred great courage. Juan Luis Vives, a Spanish humanist and educational theorist, stated that a baby fed by sow’s milk will roll in the mud. Goats were thought to transmit a libidinous character (the catholic Church condemned this behaviour with the decree *De capris expellendis et amplus non admittendis*) and some preferred to employ donkeys as wet nurses instead as they were thought to be more moral animals; in 19th century France a law was proposed to ban disreputable mothers from nursing their own children so that their immoral traits would not be transmitted via their milk. See: SCARPA 1960; RABBILL 1976; MILLIET 1987; DELGADO 2002, 151; PEDRUCCI 2013, 171; *EAD.* 2013a; *EAD.* 2014 (women breastfeeding puppies in the ancient world. In this regard, I would like to add the fact that women were not supposed to breastfeed for the first 20 days, therefore to stimulate lactation it is likely that puppies were used. See FILDÉS 1986, 27, 33). For milk’s nature, see n. 56.

Mount Cythaeron, used to breastfeed wild cubs and, at the same time, to kill and tear other animals (such as a she-veal with swollen breasts), and eat raw meat.⁴⁵ They had abandoned their new-born infants and, therefore, had their breasts still swollen. They also snatched children from their homes (v. 754). In a different version, the Ausonian Maenads of Ino’s myth plan to kidnap a child.⁴⁶ These characters, therefore, clearly represent the structural ambiguity of nurses.

Some of these infants were also the results of incest: Habis was the offspring of a father and his daughter; Zeus of brother and sister; according to Plutarch (*Rom.*, 4), Romulus and Remus were sons of Amulius, who raped Silvia, his niece. In any case, they were conceived by a vestal, one who is supposed to remain a virgin forever. This detail further reinforces the position of the baby as a not-civilized creature.⁴⁷

3. Nature and function of the *lacte ferino*

If we focus on divine or semi-divine babies, what is quite unusual in these myths is that these creatures are abandoned children who need milk to survive and grow up (or, at least, so it seems). Normally, these babies are not breastfed. Often, these children don’t even have a childhood, they don’t need care to become adults. When they are breastfed they are not breastfed by their mothers, but by nurse-like characters (especially nymphs) or by animals.⁴⁸ In one case by a tree! This raises the question, why did ancient authors introduce the breastfeeding theme, and, more generally speaking, the animal curatrophic ideas in these tales? Maybe the aim was precisely to underline –generally speaking– the otherness, the exclusiveness, the “animality” of the baby, who can be handled only by someone with the same characteristics; and to underline –more precisely– the exceptionality of these children’s fates. In these stories, in fact, wild animals behave like human beings, probably because they come into contact with extraordinary children, who can change things or create something new. Likely, these babies get something from their unusual “nurses”, possibly via milk.⁴⁹

Breastfeeding represents an act that can embarrass, that is extremely private and “feminine”, that reminds one of the animal nature and that should not be shown. Therefore, in mythic tales it was typical only of liminal characters, who can act as

⁴⁵ Cf. FARANDA 1996, 89. For prejudices against people eating raw meat in antiquity, see PEDRUCCI 2013, 185.

⁴⁶ Ov., *Fast.*, VI 501-528. For kidnappings by witches, see below. We should also recall the fact that the Bacchae make milk gush from rocks, see Eur., *Bacch.*, 708ff.

⁴⁷ BETTINI – BORGHINI 1979, 128. MOLAS FONT 2009, 145, underlines the fact that the mother of many founding or civilizing heroes was raped in Greek and Roman mythology.

⁴⁸ Many examples in PEDRUCCI 2013, 118ff., 253ff.

⁴⁹ Ovid speaks of *lacte ferino* three times (one more precisely of *lacte canino* offered to a child by the Eumenides), but in two very different ways: on the one hand, the *lacte ferino* is the nourishment of the future founder of Rome (*Fast.*, III 53); on the other hand, it is a mean to offend his enemies (*Ibis*, 229; *Trist.*, III 11,1-4). Animal milk as a vehicle to transfer a wild character to children is also present in Verg., *Aen.*, IV 367 (Aeneas, in Dido’s opinion); XI 571 (Camilla, the warrior virgin, was fed with *lacte ferino*: a character who expresses of a threefold otherness). Prop., II 6, 19f., says that Romulus inherits his ferocity from the she-wolf. Antiphanes says that breastfeeding from animals was a barbarian usage, see FILDES 1986, 23.

mediators between the baby and the civilized world of the *polis* (recall that, according to ancient medical theories, maternal milk was cooked menstrual blood).⁵⁰ We have to always keep in mind that the woman was considered as a *therion synestiomemon*, a beast eating at men’s table.⁵¹

We have to point out another detail: animals are usually good “nurses”, while human-like curotrophic characters are not necessary good. Besides the brave nurse, who protects children from monsters and evil, we find the bad nurse, who can take advantage of the close relationship with babies to hurt them. Moreover, the nurse in antiquity, even the good one, was skilled in magical practices: amulets, spells, plants and potions were used to protect those in their care when they were little, and to help them in romantic affairs once they had grown up.⁵² Occasionally, too much love was the cause of nurses’ deleterious mistakes. The bad nurse could be also associated with an animal, the *strix* a nightly bird, which can transform itself onto an old witch and had the capacity to cause infant diseases or to make them die by feeding them poisoned milk.⁵³ Again, the theme of breastfeeding is associated with something “animal” (in a negative sense, in this case).⁵⁴

Another character connected with magic is the mid-wife. She was also an ambiguous figure. She was, in some cases, associated with a very elusive animal, the weasel.⁵⁵ She was the first who literally handled the new little, precious “animal”; her world was completely interdicted to men, full of blood and other disgusting humors, full of “otherness”.

4. Conclusions

What can we infer from the examined examples so far? Animals, but also other creature in many ways close to animals, are positive curotrophic characters in myths and legends of exposed children. They rescue them and they rear them, often they breast-feed them. Usually, stories with the breastfeeding theme are more “marvelous”. This is consistent with their nature but, since divine or in some other way extraordinary children usually are not breastfed and don’t even need particular cares to grow up, the help and the food of these extraordinary “nurses” must tell us something more.

⁵⁰ PEDRUCCI 2013; *EAD.* 2013a.

⁵¹ *Secund.*, *Sent.* 8. See LANATA 2000, 18.

⁵² For the sources, above all Latin, see MENCACCI 1995, 230, n. 7.

⁵³ According to Pliny (*NH*, XI 95), the bat can breastfeed, but he does not believe that *striges* can so, as attested in popular tales.

⁵⁴ The most famous description of the attack of a *strix* against a child left unattended in its cradle by its nurse is in *Ov.*, *Fast.*, XVI 131f. The first one to identify *amma* and *strix* was Isidorus (*Etym.*, XII 7.42), who informs us that this bird can breastfeed new-borns. More Latin sources in CURLETTO 1987, nn. 72f. Folk stories concerning witches who threaten (in some cases breastfeed) sleeping children are world-widespread. The *maleficium lactis*, one of the most frequent charge during the hearings against witches, was particularly fearful. It caused the loss of milk or the refusal of it by the baby. See: LIONETTI 1984, 20f.; CAMPORESI 1993, 14ff.; PEDRUCCI 2013, 257f. For the *strix*, see CHERUBINI 2010.

⁵⁵ BETTINI 1998, 151f.

Even if offering her breast to her child is supposed to be the most natural and common gesture for a mother (especially before the invention of artificial milk), breastfeeding itself has to be considered an extraordinary act (outside the domestic space). Milk is not at all a neutral liquid: it is blood, it contains genetic characteristics.⁵⁶ From the myth, we learn that it is shown only in particular contexts with very specific meanings.⁵⁷ These children –symbolically– get something from their “wet-nurses” nature (and, in a lesser way, from the close contact with their “animal-like nurses”) that makes them able to discharge their destiny. What exactly, it is difficult to say. Perhaps something connected with the specific traits of their species.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ According to physicians and philosophers, human milk was menstrual blood. It was “cooked” during the pregnancy. It became white and lighter in order to go directly from the womb to the breast. Moreover, concerning its nature from a more general point of view: milk is an ancient and universal food, sustaining us from birth. However, only a small percentage of the world’s population drinks milk: animal milk is probably the most controversial of food there is and breastfeeding is an extremely controversial gesture as well. Milk’s qualities and associated dangers have been discussed since the dawn of civilisation, which has resulted in milk being demonized as “white poison” or exalted as “white elixir”. From the sources, we gain the impression that in both Greece and Rome there was a hot debate on milk as an aliment and on breastfeeding, even if they were pastoral people, milk (and dairy products) were supposed to be their major source of proteins (meat consumption for poor people was limited to ritual occasions). It was indicated only for children, women, old people, and barbarians. A young and healthy male citizen was not supposed to drink milk, even if he probably did sometimes in his everyday life. Milk was not a drink, it was food. According to the ancient medicine, like all food its consumption has consequences on human health. See: AUBERGER 2001; PEDRUCCI 2013, 157-202; *EAD.* 2013a.

⁵⁷ Heracles suckled by Hera, or the suckling of the son of Amphiaraus, Alcmeon, by his mother Eriphyle. See PEDRUCCI 2013, 79f.

⁵⁸ The wolf, for instance, is wild and violent, but independent and genuine, in one word very “masculine” FRANCO 2003, 268ff. See e.g.: Aristot., *HA*, I 23 488b; I 25 189a; Hor., *Ep.*, II 2.28. Also very ravenous, see e.g. Ael., *NA*, VII 20). It is also very smart (Ael., *NA*, III 6; V 19; VIII 14. Evil, see Aesop., 64). It can protect from evil, and in fact, according to Pliny (*NH*, XXVIII 46, 49, 78), many amulets are made from this animal. In Eva Cantarella’s opinion, wolves play a role during initiation rites, in particular by marking the regression to an uncivilised society (in particular, dressing like a wolf, see Dolon in the *Odyssey*. CANTARELLA 2011, 277-280). The horse is dignified and haughty, a bit too arrogant, very quick and strong, ready in learning things, very useful in battle, a symbol of beauty. It is grateful, reliable and generous: The mare can adopt other colts. It does not tolerate being humiliated (Hom., *Il.*, II 760ff.; Sem., Fr. 7 West=7 Pellizer – Tedeschi, 56ff.; Aesop., 139; Aristot., *HA*, VI 22 576a; IX 5 611a; Plin., *NH*, VIII 61; Ael., *NA*, II 10; VI 44; VII 46; XI 18; XIII 25; XVI 23; 25). Horses and dogs are often put together, even if the dog is a very ambiguous animal: it is devoted and smart, beloved by humans, it can heal itself using its own saliva, it can discern good and evil, friend and enemy (this is a characteristic also shared by horses: in fact, some mares can discern Greeks from barbarian people and they can fall in love with the first ones. See Ael., *NA*, XVI 24. This makes the horse a typical cultural animal, see LANATA 2000, 18. The close relationship between horses, dogs, women and slaves is analysed in VILATTE 1986). It is useful but servile and shameless: according to Cristiana Franco, these negative characteristics make the dog a very “feminine” animal (Hom., *Il.*, I 225; *Od.*, XVII 248; Aristot., *HA*, I 26 489a; Plin., *NH*, VIII 61; Ael., *NA*, I 8; VI 10, 25, 62; VII 10, 19, 38, 40; VIII 9; XI 3, 5, 13, 19f. It is almost superfluous to recall Argos in the *Odyssey*. See: BODSON 1994; FRANCO 2003). Some species, however, are extremely brave (Aristot., *HA*, IX 1 608b). The deer has nice breath, with which it can kill a snake, its antler is very powerful against illness, it is smart, reliable and cautious, but fearful, it is in some way protected by Apollo (Hom., *Il.*, I 225; Aristot., *HA*, I 25 489a; VI 26 579a-b, long-lived too? See Plin., *NH*, VIII 50; IX 6 611b; Ael., *NA*, II 9; III 17; VI 11; VII 46; XI 7). The Roman aristocracy used to tame deers to keep them in their villas during the summer time just because of their beauty (TOYNEE 1973, 143.). The goat is wise, in Aelian’s opinion; but quite stupid in Aristotle’s opinion (Ael., *NA*, VII 26; Aristot., *HA*, IX 4 611a). Moreover, the goat alludes both to the feminine, in terms of sexual energy out of control, and to the masculine, in terms of military power and conquest over one’s enemy. This double symbolism of the particular animal is closely tied

More generally speaking, the physical superiority of animals is a well-known motif, as the myth of the platonic *Protagoras* for instance clearly shows.⁵⁹ Pliny⁶⁰ seems to suggest that the suckling of infants by animals is due to the grandeur of the fate of the fulfilled. Porphyry⁶¹ says that a person fortunate enough to have had an animal nurse boasted not so much of his pedigree as of his having nursed by animal. Aelian⁶² writes that gods love animals, even if they cannot speak, they are smart and wise; he also states that they can use animals to inform about the destiny of a special baby, since animals are blessed by divine benevolence. One of the main Aelian’s ideas –and, more generally speaking, of the Greek and Roman thought– is that a human or divine being “per il bene o per il male, in via definitiva oppure incidentale, poteva fare la prova dell’animalità”.⁶³ Indeed, “the mothering breast and the foster-father, frequently in the guise of a shepherd, appear with the timeliness of a *deus ex machina* in a divine tragedy”.⁶⁴

The savage nature of their *kourotrophoi* allows them to take care of babies better than others; thanks to their “animality” and their otherness those in their care become strong and “different” enough to reverse the established order.⁶⁵ The new, better order, is part of the “gentle”, “civilized” nature, that can help the baby return to civilization. Moreover, it is also quite obvious that these animal nurses are acting against their own nature.⁶⁶ Therefore, their behaviours might confirm the exceptional qualities of the exposed child and its protection by the gods, sometimes by its own divine father. The fact that these children are sometimes twins reinforces their being “out of nature”. The location is also a wild space.

Let us re-consider briefly the most famous of these legends in conclusion. Moilas Font underlines the fact that the wolf was an animal associated with Mars and, more generally speaking, with virility and strength. In this regard, the she-wolf who breastfeeds the twins can be a way to deny (maybe mortify) her maternal role to Sil-

to its apotropaic function and it is illustrated in the Hellenistic myth of the constellation of Amaltheia related by ps.-Eratosthenes (*Catasterismoi*, 1.13). Just to mention animals more frequently involved in the stories of exposed children. Cf. note 49.

⁵⁹ LANATA 1994. See also Lucr., *De rer. nat.*, V 222ff., on the weakness of the human new-born. On the respect and affection for animals in the ancient world, see BODSON 1994. In some parts of his work, Plutarch also affirms the animal superiority as concern the braveness (shared by males and females), refusal of slavery, temperance, absence of moral corruption. They also have a sort of rationality. See SANTESE 1994.

⁶⁰ *NH*, VIII 22. According to FRANCO (2005, 242) horses, elephants, eagles, lions and dogs were “royal” animals *par excellence*. He states: “nell’immaginario legato al potere, il simbolo animale aveva una sua immediata evidenza: la misteriosa *sympatheia* tra uomini carismatici e natura, l’esibizione trionfale dei mirabilia naturali, le suggestive storie sui potenti della terra costruiscono una prospettiva fascinosa e spettacolare in cui il re ellenistico e poi l’imperatore romano appaiono, divinamente, quasi *despotaitheron*”.

⁶¹ *Abst.*, III 17. Cf. Plut., *De fort. Rom.*, 8.

⁶² *HA*, XI 31; XIII 1. For the close relationship between men and animals in Aelian, see SMITH 2014.

⁶³ LANATA 2000, 10.

⁶⁴ MCCARTNEY 1925, 39.

⁶⁵ This might be confirmed by Cicero’s world (*De re publ.*, II 2) and in Livy’s ones (I 4) about the exceptionality of Romulus and Remus destiny.

⁶⁶ Indeed, MCCARTNEY 1925, 30, mentioned the case, recalled by Procopius (*De bello gothico*, II 17), of a goat who spontaneously gave suck to a baby abandoned by their parents and protected him during the Gothic invasion of Italy. We have to remark, however, that the goat is not a wild animal.

via, the silent and submissive sinful vestal, in order to celebrate the paternal role and figure. This detail might become particularly enlightening, if we think of the possibility of transmitting via milk genetic characteristics.⁶⁷

In summary, at the very end. Generally speaking, for an analysis of anthropopoiesis, the othering and “saming” of marginal characters, as well as the making of social control strategies, it is generally relevant to consider animals as key agents in such processes. Scholars have well established that children in Greek and Roman cultures share their nature with animals. Women, above all those women who physically and concretely take care of it,⁶⁸ that is nurses and, secondarily, midwives, are also shady and wild characters. In some extraordinary cases, babies (both human and not-human) with extraordinary destinies are directly breastfed by animals.⁶⁹ This evidently makes these babies different from other humans, sets them apart from the rest of the world. But why? Why suckling milk from the female animal is so crucial in these stories? Ancient sources concerning breastfeeding –not only the medical ones– usually place emphasis on the hemogenesis of breastmilk and on the possibility of transmitting genetic and personal characteristics via milk.

My main idea is that those babies, who were luckily and unbelievably saved from certain death by a she-animal, suckled directly from her nipples⁷⁰ something that make them different from the rest of the world and able to carry out a destiny of glory.

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⁶⁷ MOLAS FONT 2009. BRIQUEL 1976, 77-84, pointed out that in Greek tales the role of the mother is more important (sometimes she has a female antagonist); in the Roman ones she usually disappears after the twins’ birth.

⁶⁸ For this crucial distinction concerning distal and proximal parenting strategies in the classical world, see PEDRUCCI – SCAPINI forthcoming.

⁶⁹ Not only in the Greek and Roman lore, indeed.

⁷⁰ Drinking milk directly at the breast was a way to not lose its beneficent proprieties, see PEDRUCCI 2013a, 274.

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