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# MIDWIVES IN BYZANTIUM: AN OVERVIEW

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#### Abstract

This paper aims to draft an overview of what being a midwife in Byzantium meant, according to the literary sources. Midwife in Byzantium appears to be a rather complex and elusive figure to study. This is due to both the scarce references in the sources and the vague definition of midwifery itself in the ancient world. The main fields of activity of Byzantine midwives were three: medical, religious and care. As a first attempt of studying Byzantine midwife all-round, this paper ends by suggesting further research perspectives in order to get a clearer and more complete understanding of such figure.

*Keywords:* Midwife, birth, breastfeeding, gender studies, anthropology.

#### Resumen

El presente artículo se propone trazar un cuadro general sobre el significado de la figura de la nodriza en Bizancio, en base a las fuentes literarias. La nodriza en Bizancio resulta ser una figura enigmática y difícil de estudiar, principalmente debido a las escasas referencias que se encuentran en las fuentes, pero también a la vaga definición de sus funciones en el mundo antiguo. Los principales campos de acción de las nodrizas bizantinas eran tres: médico, religioso y de cuidado. Tratándose de un primer acercamiento al estudio de la nodriza bizantina en sus múltiples aspectos, este artículo se concluye proponiendo posibles puntos de vista investigativos que posibiliten una comprensión más clara y completa de dicha figura.

Palabras clave: Nodriza, nacimiento, lactancia, estudios de género, antropología.

## MIDWIVES IN BYZANTIUM: AN OVERVIEW

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Studying the figure of midwife in order to find her social and cultural positioning within an ancient civilization is not an easy task. The reticence of the sources and the spontaneous and non-regulated character of midwifery definitely do not help to understand what "being a midwife" meant in the ancient world. As an answer to a community's necessities, the midwife's area of activity did not have clear borders, and it covered the medical, religious and care fields: hence, midwife was a sort of *sage-femme*.

In this sense, a certain cultural homogeneity can be found – in both spatial and chronological terms – especially in a group of medical sources from the *Gynaecology* of Soranus of Ephesus (1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD) until the Byzantine period which depict what has been defined the deontology of midwife, i.e., the physical, intellectual and moral features to be owned by the aspiring midwife.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it cannot be denied

- \* I would like to thank Professor Luigi Silvano for his comments on previous drafts, as well as Dr. Juan Manuel Fernandez Martinez for his help with the Spanish translation. Needless to say, any remaining mistakes are my own responsibility.
- <sup>1</sup> Likewise problematic are those sources where the midwife is a stereotyped character, such as in Aristaenet., *Epist.* 6. Ed. O. Mazal, *Aristaeneti epistularum libri ii* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1971), 15-16.
- Danielle Gourevitch, "Préparation intellectuelle et déontologie de la sage-femme: du traité *Des maladies des femmes* de Soranos d'Éphèse aux *Infortunes de Dinah*", in *From Athens*

that these outlined features represent only the typological model of midwife and that, therefore, the picture one infers neither simplifies nor exhausts the study of this figure. Quite the opposite, it represents just the background.

The close reading of the sources – many of which have not been considered yet in relation to this specific aspect – makes the great variety of cultural implications of midwifery come to light. Indeed, midwives had tight connections with the familiar – and more specifically with the dynamics of kinship –, social – in relation to their recognition by the community –, religious – they were indeed involved in the Christian rituals of infancy –, medical – they had gynaecological competences –, ethical – as far as the judgment criteria of their deontology is concerned – and psychological – as regards ancient cultural themes and taboos appearing in the sphere of women care – dimensions.

For the purpose of an overall picture of midwives in Byzantium, primarily literary sources are taken into consideration. Therefore, after a preliminary lexical analysis to explain how the sources were identified, the paper focuses on the description and interpretation of the research corpus. The latter phase, which clearly represents the most difficult one, is based on the idea that Byzantine midwife reflects the typically Byzantine cultural process of mixing tradition with innovation. Christianity appears to be one of the most innovative (internal) factors that guided the re-functionalisation of midwives as social and cultural subjects in Byzantium.

### II. SPARKS OF LEXICAL RESEARCH

Taking into account the several attested epigraphic variants,<sup>3</sup> the terms that were used to define the midwife are numerous. Nevertheless,  $\mu\alpha$ ia,  $\tau$ i $\tau\theta\eta$  and à $\mu\mu$ à are not only the most present terms in the sources, but also those envisaged by the Byzantine lexica, which make specific distinctions between their uses, according to the context when the midwife intervened.

to Jerusalem. Medicine in hellenized jewish lore and in early Christian literature, eds. Samuel Kottek, Manfred Horstmanshoff, Gerhard Baader, and Gary Ferngren (Rotterdam: Erasmus, 2000), 69-81.

 $^3$  τιτθίς, τιτθευτρία, τιθηνός, τιθήνη, τροφός, τροφώ, βάια, βαβά, βυζάστρια. See Joëlle Beaucamp, "L'allaitement: mère ou nourrice?", JÖB 32 (1982), 549-558: 550.

For example, Photius defined *maia* "she who cuts the umbilical cord", <sup>4</sup> namely she who participated in the delivery and dealt with the ὀμφαλητομία. As for *tithe*, Photius explains it through the synonym τροφός, showing a linguistic evolution as compared to what Ptolemaeus Ascalonita (uncertain, between the 2<sup>nd</sup> AC and the 2<sup>nd</sup> CE) wrote in his *De differentia vocabulorum*, distinguishing between *tithe* (as she who breastfeeds) and *trophos/tithenos* (as she who takes care of the baby after the weaning) <sup>5</sup>. The absence of this differentiation is confirmed also by Eustathius of Thessalonica in his *Commentaries on Iliad*, where he significantly attributes the distinction to οἱ  $\pi\alpha\lambda\alpha\iota$ οἷ.

In general, at least as far as the literary level is concerned, *maia* and *tithe* are preferred in comparison to other terms, such as ὀμφαλητόμος, τροφός, τιθηνός and ἄμμα, whose instances are definitely less.

## III. MIDWIFE IN THE TEXTS: TEXTUAL AND NARRATOLOGICAL NOTES

When approaching literary sources, one needs to be careful about employing the texts as objective and reliable evidences of phenomena: to distinguish the literary from the factual level is necessary in order to correctly interpret the sources. Therefore, before acquiring the useful data to draft a picture of midwives in Byzantium, the textual dynamics of the literary sources need to be recognized and deconstructed.

For the purpose of gathering tendencies and conventions of the texts depicting midwives, medical literature was excluded, because of the compiling nature of these works, which mainly retrieved and systematized the Greek medical knowledge. This compositional process makes them almost useless to inquire the social and cultural role of midwives in Byzantium: they indeed do not necessarily reflect the contemporary context, but rather they are the product of an intellectual opera-

- <sup>4</sup> Phot. Lex. μ 25. Ed. R. Porson, Φωτίου τοῦ πατριάρχου λέξεων συναγωγή (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1822), 531.
- <sup>5</sup> Ptolom. Asc. De diff. Voc. Ed. H. Heylbut, "Ptolemaeus Περὶ διαφορᾶς λέξεων", Hermes, 22 (1887) 388-410, 394.18-21.
- <sup>6</sup> Eust. Thess. Comm. Iliad. Ed. M. van der Valk, Eustathii archiepiscopi Thessalonicensis commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem pertinentes, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 343.21.

tion driven by the reuse of the classical material.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, in this section mainly historical and religious sources are analysed.

### II.1 MIDWIVES AS CHARACTERS IN THE HISTORICAL SOURCES

The historical sources where the midwife is present as a character are very few. But all the authors seem to be aware of the classical lexical distinction between the midwife-maia and the midwife-tithe: Procopios uses the term tithe in relation to a woman who takes care of a new born, breastfeeding and raising him up; 8 while Manasses uses the term maiai referring to midwives who had to kill babies at the exact moment in which they are given born, being reasonably present at the moment of the delivery. 9

Secondly, in both the passages in question midwives, despite being minor characters, take part in highly dramatic and fictional scenes. Commentating the above-mentioned passage from Procopios about the concealment of Coades II, F. M. Pontani speaks of a "vena romanzesca"  $^{10}$  (transl.: "novel streak") of the historian. Analogously, the second episode is defined by Manasses himself as a δόλος and soon after μηχανορραφία. Furthermore, in both cases midwives are involved in a violent action towards children, as the addressees of a mighty person's order. It is thus well-built the servile status of midwives, as well as the awareness that the closest person to the baby is the most suitable to damage him emerges.

Lastly, an aspect which is worthy of further attention is that in both the examined sources midwives represent the Other: why the only midwives to whom Byzantine historians gave attention are strangers? And for which purpose did these midwives

- Antonio Garzya, Roberto De Lucia, Alessia Guardasole, Anna Maria Ieraci Bio, Maria Lamagna, and Roberto Romano, *Medici bizantini*. *Oribasio di Pergamo, Aezio d'Amida, Alessandro di Tralle, Paolo d'Egina, Leone medico* (Torino: UTET, 2006): 27. On the concept of *Gebrauchsliteratur* cfr. Antonio Garzya, "Testi letterari d'uso strumentale a Bisanzio", *Vichiana*, 10 (1981), 118-143.
- <sup>8</sup> Procop. Pers. 1, 23, 7-9. Ed. G. Wirth (post J. Haury), Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia, vols. 1-2 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1962), 119.
- <sup>9</sup> Manass. *Chron.*, vv. 991-1007. Ed. O. Lampsides, *Constantini Manassis Breviarium Chronicum* [*Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* 36.1] (Athens: Academy of Athens, 1996), 57-58.
- Filippo Maria Pontani, "Introduzione", in *Le guerre: persiana, vandalica, gotica / Procopio di Cesarea*, ed. Marcello Craveri (Torino: Einaudi, 1977), VII-XLI: XXXVII.

obtained literary dignity? The fact that these midwives are part of wicked intrigues might suggest that their character was employed as an efficient literary module for the representation of the (negative) stereotype of the Other.

## II.2. Midwives as Characters in the Religious Sources

Many more are the mentions of midwives in the religious sources. On the one hand, there are the *Commentaries* on Scripture, where midwives are not the ambiguous characters of Graeco-Roman comedies and tragedies anymore, but women who take care of important characters of the Biblical history, so as to acquire a sacred function.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, there is a second category of texts which include ecclesiastic histories and hagiography.

As for this second category, two main tendencies prevail in representing the midwife as a character. From an ideological point of view, the authors are inclined to deny the character of midwife in favour of the mother, consistently with the development of the female sanctity's model. In this sense, the most relevant source is the *Life of Macrina* (4<sup>th</sup> c. CE) by Gregory of Nyssa.

Thanks to the means of the family, the first born Macrina had a personal midwife, but the author specifies that she was closest to her mother. As a consequence, the bond between mother and daughter is strengthened, acquiring relevance from a religious point of view. Indeed, in his family portrait Gregory of Nyssa insists on the character of Emmelia, the mother of Gregory and Macrina. Since for Christians sanctity was a form of election, even the woman who gives birth to a saint needs to be elected. Therefore, in this case, the virtue of Emmelia contributes to (and at the same time legitimates) the depiction of Macrina as a saint. The physical motherhood of Emmelia moves to the reli-

- For example: Euseb. *Quaest. Evang. Ad Steph. PG* 22, 903.28; Io. Chrys. *Ad Stag. PG* 47, 467.44; Thdt. *Explan. in Cant. Cantic. PG* 81, 40.5. Analogously, Christian art offers representation of midwives of this kind, such as the very peculiar scene of Nativity of the fresco located inside the monastery of Apa Apolla (Bawit, Egypt), where the midwife Salome is depicted with a squared halo. See Jean Clédat, Dominique Bénazeth, Marie-Hélène Rutschowscaya, Anne Bouvarel-Boud'hors, and René-Georges Coquin, *Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouit* (Le Caire: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1999): 110-113.
- Gr.Nyss. *V.Macr.* 3, 1-6. Eds. W. Jaeger, J. P. Cavarnos, V. Woods Callahan, *Gregorii Nysseni opera VIII*, *Opera Ascetica*, vol. I: 373, 4-9.

gious level when the ascetism of the saint (Macrina) consists in not detaching from her own mother. In turn, Macrina herself will perform a "spiritual motherhood" towards her brother Peter: as an ascetic virgin, she will raise up and educate the brother – taking him away from the midwife –,<sup>13</sup> exercising especially the mother's pedagogical trait.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, since this first tendency implies a sort of negation action, we do not find many examples of this kind. When the midwife is among the characters, the above-mentioned ideological substrate is lost and a second tendency replaces it. The Christian midwife acquires a precise narratological role, as she who allows the encounter between divine and human and thus mediates among these two dimensions. She starts the unfolding of the action where the intervention of God is realized and accomplished: in other words, she is an instrument of God.

Regarding this second tendency, the examples come from works that date to different Byzantine periods, but where the meaning of her character within the texts is always the same, even if the modalities of construction of such an auxiliary role of the "holy midwife" change.<sup>15</sup>

For example, Theodoret of Cyrrhus recalls the miraculous healing of a possessed peasant performed by the ascetic Peter. Despite being a secondary character and appearing only in the beginning and in the end of the miracle, it is the grandmother of Theodoret – she is however addressed as "midwife" (*tithe*) – who concretely enable the encounter between the peasant and the ascetic, servant of God. In this threefold structure of characters the midwife – from an intermediate position between the saint (= divine) and the peasant (= human) – acts so as to make the divine plan successful.

- <sup>13</sup> Gr. Nyss. V.Macr. 12, 1-11. Ibidem, 383, 9-19.
- Elena Giannarelli, *La vita di s. Macrina / s. Gregorio di Nissa* (Milano: Edizioni paoline, 1988): 50-52, 54, 56.
- In addition to the two episodes discussed below, also *V.Thecl.* 2, 24, 1-50. Ed. G. Dagron, *Vie et miracles de sainte Thècle* [*Subsidia hagiographica* 62] (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1978), 350-352 and *Life of Constantine the former Jew* 3, 12-28. Ed. *AASS* Nov. IV, 628-656: 629 belongs to this category.
- Thdt. H.Rel. 9, 10, 2-21. Eds. P. Canivet A. Leroy-Molinghen, Théodoret de Cyr. L'histoire des moines de Syrie, 2 vols. [Sources chrétiennes 234, 257] (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1:1977; 2:1979), 424, 426.

Analogously, in the *Life of Porphyry of Gaza* (5<sup>th</sup> c.) the miraculous delivery of a woman called Ailias is described, in which there is also the participation of a midwife. <sup>17</sup> Next to informing us about the social class of the family (it was indeed a rich one), the traits which characterize the midwife are equally interesting: she is faithful ( $\pi \iota \sigma \tau \dot{\eta}$ ), devout ( $\dot{\upsilon}\pi\epsilon\rho\alpha\lambda\gammao\tilde{\upsilon}\sigma\alpha$ ), elder ( $\gamma\rho\alpha\tilde{\upsilon}\varsigma$ ) and very sensitive and devoted to her mistress, as the fact she bursts out crying for the pains of the woman shows. This (textual) description resembles the artistic representations of deliveries, where in particular the non-verbal communication between the midwife and the woman about to give birth emerges as a "woman to woman" <sup>18</sup> relation, where emotions and pains are shared. <sup>19</sup>

In this episode, the midwife has a much more relevant narrative role, as compared to that of the woman in labour. The midwife is indeed Christian (αὐτῆς εὐχομένης ἐν τῆ ἐκκλησίᾳ μετὰ δακρύων), <sup>20</sup> and again from a narratological point of view she allows the development of the story: in this case the action of the God is finalized not only to the delivery but to the following conversion of sixty-four people who were present (the parturient's relatives).

### IV. MIDWIVES AS SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SUBJECTS IN BYZANTIUM

Once the sources have been examined from a literary point of view, data about the actual presence of midwives in Byzantine society can be inferred in order to get an overall picture of what being a midwife in Byzantium meant.

#### IV.1. Medical Field

The first and perhaps more well-known role attributed to midwives is related to gynaecology and the obstetrical art. Born as an empirical knowledge, the practice of the midwife-*maia* underwent an evolution within the society, becoming a profession. According to Barnawi, Richter and Habib, the birth of the *nosokomeia* – from

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Marc. Diac. *V.Porph.* 29-30. Eds. H. Grégoire – M.-A. Kugener, *Marc le Diacre. Vie de Porphyre*, évêque de Gaza (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1930), 25-27.

Mati Meyer, "Woman to Woman': Parturient-Midwife Imagery in Byzantine Art", *RSBS*, 6 (2004), 101-114: 113.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*: 113-114.

Marc. Diac. V.Porph. 29.3-4. Eds. Grégoire – Kugener, op. cit., 25.

the  $4^{th}$  c. as aid structures for poor till the  $12^{th}$  c. when they were hospitals for all intents and purposes – and the Islamic culture – which empowered the role of women in the gynaecological field, distancing it from the male domain – are two important factors in the evolution of the conception of cure and healing, and consequently of midwifery too. <sup>21</sup>

The Life of Porphyry of Gaza is surely among the earliest Byzantine sources about midwives-maiai. Despite medical details are missing, the image of delivery as a dangerous and life-threatening moment for women clearly emerges from the above-mentioned narrative, as the expressions κινδύνψ μεγάλψ, ἡ ὀδύνη ἄφατος, οἱ πόνοι ἕως ἡμερῶν ἑπτά and the final line "the doctors [...] abandoned her to her destiny" suggest. Equally clear is that midwives were involved actively in the delivery: the expression "they weren't able to put it in the right position" implies a manual intervention and a certain technical expertise. The real discriminating factor of this episode is the delivery's typology. The deliver in question is indeed not a regular one, but a difficult delivery with complications. In this sense, the adverbial expressions οὐκέτι [...] κατὰ φύσιν and παρὰ φύσιν, then clarified with "the baby [...] was indeed placed across in the womb of the mother", are evocative. These complications cause the intervention of the doctors (oi iatroi): it is thus defined a hierarchy between the doctors and the midwives.

- Najla Barnawi, Solina Richter, and Farida Habib, "Midwifery and midwives: a historical analysis", *Journal of Research in Nursing and Midwifery*, 2, no. 8 (2013), 114-121: 117.
  - Marc. Diac. V. Porph. 28. Eds. Grégoire Kugener, op. cit., 24-25.
- This passage of Marcus Diaconus was connected with the "suspended delivery" motif by Francesca Rizzo Nervo, "Il parto bloccato: metamorfosi di un motivo letterario", in *Munera amicitiae: studi di storia e cultura sulla tarda antichità offerti a Salvatore Pricoco*, eds. Rossana Barcellona, and Teresa Sardella (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2003), 407-427: 407. This motif has a long-standing tradition that goes back to Homer (cfr. Hom. *Il.* 19, 101-105). Its fundamental thematic segments in the Classical tradition (cfr. Maurizio Bettini, *Nascere. Storie di donne, donnole, madri ed eroi,* (Torino: Einaudi, 2018): 3-37), despite being adapted to the new cultural demands of the Christian society, are still present in Byzantine attestations. I do not agree with F. Rizzo Nervo when she affirms that in the Christian texts the "Liberator" one of the thematic segments of the motif is not a female character anymore, but a male one (Francesca Rizzo Nervo, *op. cit.*, 2003: 413): instead, I believe that, as much as rare, the references to midwives in such texts need to be valorised.

There are both literary and archaeological evidences in favour of the fact that midwifery was also about magic beliefs and non-scientific procedures. A passage from Aetius of Amida is particularly explicit: the physician warns that undemonstrated practices could be dangerous for the foetus.<sup>24</sup> In fact, amulets addressed specifically to a female public (and its diseases) are valuable evidences of the existence of such practices.<sup>25</sup>

Even if a sort of officially recognized medical role was attributed to midwives already before, the birth of the hospitals in the Eastern Empire was a real turning point, both from a social and an economic point of view. If in the beginning they were shelters for the elderly, orphans, poor and strangers, at the end of the 4th c. some of these structures distinguished for the permanent presence of doctors and nurses, as well as for their organization and medical instrumentation. It is very probably that already in the 5th c. such structures became hospitals for all intents and purposes.<sup>26</sup>

The 12th c. represents the peak of the Byzantine hospitals' development. The most important source about the organization of these hospitals in our possession dates indeed to this period, namely the *typikon* of the *Pantokrator Xenon*, founded by John Komnenus II and his wife Irene in 1136. <sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, we must be careful when approaching to this text, since, as a foundation document, it tells how things should have been rather than how they effectively were. In any case, what matters to us is that within the presentation of the staff, according to a certain professional hierarchy, the *hypourgissai* (i.e., professional midwives) are mentioned and, as P. Gautier high lightened, their salary was the same as the male equivalents. <sup>28</sup>

To conclude this first section, the juridical involvement of midwives related to their medical expertise needs to be addressed. The first (negative) case was when the

See Aët, *Iatr.* 6, 1, 9-14. Ed. A. Olivieri, *Aëtii Amideni libri medicinales v-viii* [*Corpus medicorum Graecorum* 8.2] (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1950), 123.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Cfr. Gary Vikan, "Art, Medicine, and Magic in Early Byzantium", *DOP*, 38 (1984), 65-86: 76-80.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Timothy Miller, "Byzantine Hospitals", *DOP*, 38 (1984), 53-63: 58.

See Ennio Concina, *La città bizantina* (Roma: Laterza, 2003): 36 and Peregrine Horden, "How Medicalised were Byzantine Hospitals?", *Medicina & Storia*, 2011, 213-235: 219-220.

Paul Gautier, "Le typikon du Christ Sauveur Pantocrator", *REB*, 32 (1974), 1-145: 15.

midwife contributed to an abortion, which was harshly condemned by Christians:<sup>29</sup> serious sentences were prescribed both to the woman and to all who helped with the abortion,<sup>30</sup> mainly identified with women.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, it is known that the Justinian legislation envisaged to call midwives as experts in front of the *praetor*: they were indeed considered trustworthy witnesses, since they were provided with technical skills.<sup>32</sup>

## IV.2. Religious Field

As an important factor of innovation, Christianity contributed to the re-functionalization of midwifery in the religious (and cultural more in general) field. In the concrete daily life, the most typical religious trait of the Byzantine midwife was that of being an unofficial authority who acted within the sacred space during all those (ritual) moments happening after the delivery.<sup>33</sup> First among everything, it was the baptism, which marked the social birth of a Christian<sup>34</sup> and in which the Greek tradition – especially what Laes defined the "folkloric costume" of the gap between

- See Effie Poulakou-Rebelakou, John Lascaratos, and Spyros Marketos, "Abortions in Byzantine times (325-1453 AD)", *Vesalius*, 2, no. 1 (1996), 19-25: 19 and Marie-Hélène Congourdeau, "Les abortifs dans les sources byzantines", in *Le corps à l'épreuve, Poisons, remédes et chirurgie: aspects des pratiques médicales dans l'Antiquité et le Moyen Age*, eds. Franck Collard, and Évelyne Samama (Langres: D. Guéniot, 2002), 57-70: 59.
  - Effie Poulakou-Rebelakou, John Lascaratos, and Spyros Marketos, *op. cit.*, 1996: 22.
- <sup>31</sup> Cfr. the canons 2 and 8 of Basile of Caesarea. Instead, for an exceptional case where a process for abortion revolved around a man see Marie-Hélène Congordeau, "Un procès d'avortement à Costantinople au 14e siècle", *REB*, 40 (1982), 103-115: 106.
- Dig. 25, 4, 1. Cfr. Mati Meyer, op. cit., 2004: 111. The same juridical role is attested for the Islamic midwife. See Avner Giladi, *Muslim Midwives. The Craft of Birthing in the Premodern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 118-119.
- Greek and Islamic midwives were involved in the life of the child after the delivery too, suffice it to mention the *Anfidromiai* (Cfr. Sylvie Vilatte, "La nourrice grecque: une question d'histoire sociale et religieuse", *L' Antiquité Classique*, 60 (1991), 5-28: 10) and the *subu* (Cfr. Avner Giladi, *op. cit.*, 2015: 144.) respectively.
- See Christian Laes, "Infants between biological and social birth in antiquity: a phenomenon of the 'longue durée'", *Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 63, no.3 (2014), 364-383.

the biological birth of the baby and the ceremonies for his/her social birth  $-^{35}$  is reworked and innovated.

Based on the classification provided by J. Baun,<sup>36</sup> the rituals of infancy were four, both official and unofficial, and characterized by a fascinating combination of orthodox and unorthodox authorities, as a consequence of the overlapping of the religious – birth/baptism as the official entry into the Christian community – and civil – birth/baptism as the official recognition of the individual by the community – dimensions.<sup>37</sup> They were: name divination, naming, baptism and churching of mother and child. Especially, during name divination and naming's rituals midwives were involved, because of the alleged impurity of mothers.<sup>38</sup>

Name divination used to occur on the eighth day<sup>39</sup> after the birth and, according to the orthodox practice, consisted in praying in order to inspect the will of God about

- <sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*: 369, 375.
- See Jane Baun, "Coming of Age in Byzantium: Agency and Authority in Rites of Passage from Infancy to Adulthood", in *Authority in Byzantium*, ed. Pamela Armstrong (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 113-135. When infant baptism became widespread, the Byzantine Church created these new rites connected to the birth of the child in order to give "an ecclesiastical status to the child who began his preparation for his future baptism" (Job Getcha, *The Euchologion Unveiled* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, 2018): 23-24).
- Lucia Orlandi, "Baptême et baptistères dans l'Empire romain d'Orient. Aspects culturels et sociaux (IVe-VIIe siècles)", in *IXes Rencontres annuelles internationales des des doctorants en études byzantines (2016)*, eds. Lorenzo Ciolfi, and Jeanne Devoge, 2017, 5-19 (www. porphyra.it/CsB\_V.pdf last visit on 22.03.2022): 5-6, 15.
- According to the biblical interpretation of childbearing as impure (cfr. Lev. 12.1-5, Ps. 50.7, and Jn 1.13). Cfr. also Claudia Rapp, Eirini Afentoulidou, Daniel Galadza, Ilias Nesseris, Giulia Rossetto, and Elisabeth Schiffer, "Byzantine Prayer Books as Sources for Social History and Daily Life", *JÖB*, 67 (2017), 173-212: esp. 202.
- The literary sources offer evidences about this ritual number of seven days (see for example Marc. Diac. *V.Porph.* 45. Eds. Grégoire Kugener, *op. cit.*, 37-38). Analogously, the duration of woman's impurity after the delivery estimated as forty days finds confirmations in the literary sources. For example, see *Mir. Art.* 45. Ed. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Varia graeca sacra* (St. Petersburg: Kirschbaum, 1909) (repr. Leipzig: Zentralantiquariat der deutschen demokratischen Republik, 1975), 74. Cfr. Robert Taft, "Women at Church in Byzantium", *DOP*, 52 (1998), 27-87: 79.

the name of the new born.<sup>40</sup> An annotation next to a prayer contained in the *Euchologion*<sup>41</sup> points to the presence of the midwife during naming, explaining that on the eighth day after the birth the new born was brought to the priest of the church, who, after the prayers, gave him/her the name.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, either familiar anthroponomics or magic rituals could determine the choice of the name as well. The custom of looking at the blood relations to choose the child's name seems to have been particularly common among aristocrats.<sup>43</sup> Among the available unofficial magic rituals for name divination, the ritual of divination by icon and candle<sup>44</sup> appears to be particularly relevant to us because of the engagement of the midwife.

In his *History* George Pachymeres describes how emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos and his wife Irene of Montferrat named their last daughter born in 1294. Being afraid that she would die as it had happened to the three previous daughters, they decided to celebrate the ritual of the candles, which consisted in simultaneously lighting twelve candles of the same length, to which the icons of one of the twelve apostles had been previously secured: the most durable candle (with the icon of the apostle x) would have suggested the right name for the new born as a guarantee of long life.<sup>45</sup>

- An example of what we can define the "canonical modality" of name divination is Marc. Diac. *V.Porph.* 31. Eds. Grégoire–Kugener, *op. cit.*, 27, where, after a miraculous delivery, the name of the saint i.e., Porphyry is given to the new born.
- Namely a liturgical book containing prayers to be used by the priest or the bishop as defined by Elena Velkova Velkovska, "Byzantine Liturgical Books", in *Handbook for Liturgical Studies*, vol. I, ed. Ansgar J. Chupungco (Collegeville, MN, 1997), 225-240: 228.
- <sup>42</sup> It is ms Athens EBE 662 (13<sup>th</sup> c.), as reported by Miguel Arranz, "Les sacrements de l'ancien Euchologe constantinopolitain" (3), *OCP*, 49 (1983), 284-302: 290. Cfr. Jane Baun, *op. cit.*, 2013: 117.
- <sup>43</sup> For example, empress Eudoxia named her son Theodose, as his grandfather (τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Θεοδόσιον εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ αὐτοῦ πάππου Θεοδοσίου τοῦ Σπάνου). See *V.Porph.* 44. Eds. Grégoire Kugener, *op. cit.*, 37.
  - Jane Baun, op. cit., 2013: 121-123.
- Pachym. *Hist.* 32. Eds. A. Failler V. Laurent, *Georges Pachymérès. Relations historiques*, *2 vols.* [Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae. Series Parisiensis 24.1-2] (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1984), 277. The same episode is narrated also in Pachym. *Hist. Br.* 9, 32. Ed. A. Fail-

In the beginning of the episode, it is written that "one among the experienced, and also wise, women gave an advice" (τῶν τις γυναικῶν ἐμπείρων, ἄμα δὲ καὶ σεμνῶν, βουλὴν εἰσάγει), i.e., to resort to the above-mentioned ritual. Scholars tend to identify this mysterious woman with a kind of midwife. Even if the array of names consists of those of saints, the ritual was not considered orthodox as for the practice. And to think that such a pious emperor, as Andronikos II was, resorted to this ritual – which is defined as a "custom of many"  $(\sigma υνήθη πολλοῖς)$  – is even more striking.

This mixture of religious and secular authorities during (un)official rituals concerning fundamental moments of a Christian-to be should have been both very common and perceived as dangerous by the Church. Already John Chrysostom condemned such practices that he considered pagan ( $\dot{\omega}\varsigma$  oi  $\pi\alpha\lambda\alpha$ ioì  $\tau$ ò  $\pi\rho\tilde{\omega}\tau$ ov  $\dot{\epsilon}\pi$ oίουν), but, as the passage of Pachymeres suggests, they were in use still in in the 13th c.

### IV.3. Care Field

The task of the midwives continued after the delivery, mainly taking care of the baby and the mother. Breastfeeding is obviously tightly connected with that,<sup>48</sup> but it has

ler, *Le version brève des Relations Historiques de Georges Pachymérès*, vols. 1-2 (Paris: Institut Français d'Études Byzantines, 2001/2), 69 but here details about the woman are missing.

- <sup>46</sup> Another great sample of such (un)officiality can be found in Marc. Diac. *V. Porph.* 47. Eds. Grégoire Kugener, *op. cit.*, 39, where the officiant of a perfectly Christian ceremony (the baptism) is a lay dignitary.
- <sup>47</sup> Io. Chrys. *In epistulam I ad Corinthios. PG* 61, 105.48 and Io. Chrys. *De inani gloria ed educandis liberis* 648-658. Ed. A.-M. Malingrey, *Jean Chrysostome. Sur la vaine gloire et l'éducation des enfants* [Sources chrétiennes 188] (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1972), 146 about the choice of names.
- Regarding the choice of the midwife and her requirements for breastfeeding see in particular Orib. *Inc.* 31. Ed. J. Raeder, *Oribasii collectionum medicarum reliquiae*, vol. 4 [*Corpus medicorum Graecorum* 6.2.2] (Leipzig: Teubner, 1933), 121-123 and Orib. *Inc.* 34. Ed. Raeder, *op. cit.*, 128. However, breastfeeding was just one of the tasks of a midwife. For examples, Oribasius mentions the *maieutriai* as those midwives who were expert in handling and bathing the baby (see Orib. *Inc.* 38. Ed. Raeder, *op. cit.*, 136) and Aetius of Amida describes the remedies and the unguents that the midwife prepared for various purposes, such as to help teething (see Aët. *Iatr.* 4, 9. Ed. A. Olivieri, *Aëtii Amideni libri medicinales i-iv* [*Corpus medicorum Graecorum* 8.1] (Leipzig: Teubner, 1935), 364-365).

to be noticed that some features of the sources make their interpretation quite problematic. First of all, the ancients did not make difference between the dry and the wet nurse. In fact, midwives often remained at home also after the child had grown as trusted persons, dedicating themselves to housework.<sup>49</sup> Secondly, the hypothesis of cobreastfeeding – in both the highest (mother-midwife) and poorest bracket (mother-other mothers) of the population – cannot be excluded.<sup>50</sup>

Anyway, the medical theory of the haemogenesis of maternal milk – summarized by the Hippocratic expression Τὰ γάλακτα ἀδελφὰ τῶν ἐπιμηνίων  $-^{51}$  is definitely the main reason behind resorting or not to midwives for breastfeeding in antiquity. At the same time, even if some transcultural and constant tendencies conditioned the maternal choice of breastfeeding,  $^{52}$  Greek, Roman and Byzantine customs differed a lot from each other. The sources in our possession, despite being scarce,  $^{53}$  might suggest us that resorting to midwives was a sort of trend in Rome, while it was the exception in Greece.  $^{54}$  And what about Byzantium?

- See Roberta Franchi, *Dalla Grande Madre alla madre. La maternità nel mondo classico e cristiano: miti e modelli, I. "La Grecia"* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2018): 89-90. See also Anna Maria Gloria Capomacchia, "Nutrice di eroi: ruolo e valenza di un personaggio "minore" nella tragedia greca", *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni*, 18 (1994), 11-24.
- <sup>50</sup> Giulia Pedrucci, "Baliatico, αἰδώς e malocchio: capire l'allattamento nella Grecia di epoca arcaica e classica anche con l'aiuto delle fonti romane", *EuGeStA*, 5 (2015), 27-53: 37-37.
- <sup>51</sup> Hp. *Epid.* II. 3. 17. 19. Ed. É. Littré, *Oeuvres complètes d'Hippocrate*, vol. 5 (Paris: Baillière, 1846), 118.
- Vanessa Maher, *Il latte materno: i condizionamenti culturali di un comportamento*, trad. Miki Salvatorelli (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1992).
- Regarding the lack of literary (and artistic too) representations of breastfeeding, in the course of time scholars proposed several explanations, such as the taboo of female nudity (cfr. Larissa Bonfante, "Iconografia delle madri: Etruria e Italia antica", in *Le donne in Etruria*, ed. Antonia Rallo (Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1989), 85-106. and Larissa Bonfante, "Nursing Mothers in Classical Art", in *Naked Truths. Women, Sexuality and Gender in Classical Art and Archaeology*, eds. Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow, Claire Lyons, Natalie Boymel Kampen (London-New York: Routledge, 1997), 174-196). More recently, the theory of *aidòs* has been promoted. Cfr. Giulia Pedrucci, *L'allattamento nella Grecia di epoca arcaica e classica* (Roma: Scienze e Lettere, 2013), 119-124 and Giulia Pedrucci, *op. cit.*, 2015: 43-47.
  - <sup>54</sup> Cfr. Giulia Pedrucci, *op. cit.*, 2015: 33.

When approaching the theme of breastfeeding in Byzantium, one faces a complete absence of monographs and a rather limited number of studies. The rich and precise essay of J. Beaucamp makes an exception. <sup>55</sup> Based upon the sources, two aspects of breastfeeding in Byzantium come to the fore. The first one concerns the frequency with which breastfeeding was assigned to midwives. Concerning this point, the social and economic factor appears to be decisive. While rich people more often resorted to midwives for breastfeeding, <sup>56</sup> poor mothers themselves usually breastfed their sons <sup>57</sup> and breastfeeding by midwives occurred only in exceptional situations. For example, Anna Komnene reports that in the orphanage rebuilt by her father Alexios I Komnenos there were "children breastfed by mothers of others" (βρέφη τιθηνούμενα παρ' ἀλλοτρίων μητέρων). <sup>58</sup>

As pointed out by Beaucamp,<sup>59</sup> the Egyptian papyrological documentation confirms this picture. Out of seven papyri – which date from the end of the  $3^{rd}$  to the  $7^{th}$  c. – only one mentions a midwife who works for a poor family because of the mother's death, four refer to midwives hired by rich families and one describes a mother who is breastfeeding her son. The seventh papyrus  $(3^{rd}$  c.  $CE)^{60}$  is, in my opinion, great evidence – especially if we think that there are not any literary filters – of the so-called theory of breastfeeding as a male choice.<sup>61</sup> It is indeed the private letter written to a husband by either the mother or the father of the wife, where the sender insists on the fact that the man, if he really cares for the wife, should agree to resort to a midwife for breastfeeding their son.

- Joëlle Beaucamp, op. cit., 1982.
- See Ger. V.Mel. 4, 55. Ed. D. Gorce, Vie de Sainte Mélanie [Sources chrétiennes 90] (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1962), 234, 236; Theo. Sim. Hist. 8, 11. Ed. C. de Boor, Theophylacti Simocattae historiae (Leipzig: Teubner, 1887) (repr. 1972 (1st edn. corr. P. Wirth)), 305; Psell. Chron.. Ed. É. Renauld, Michel Psellos. Chronographie ou histoire d'un siècle de Byzance (976-1077), 2 vol. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1928) (repr. 1967), 178 about members of the imperial family breastfed by midwives, and Psell. Encom. Mat. 8. Ed. U. Criscuolo, Michele Psello. Autobiografia: encomio per la madre (Naples: M. D'Auria, 1989), 100-101.
  - See for example *Mir.Art.* 11. Ed. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *op. cit.*, 11-12.
- <sup>58</sup> Ann. Comn. *Aless.* 15, 7, 6, 1-6. Ed. B. Leib, *Anna Comnène. Alexiade*, 3 vol (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1945), 216.
  - <sup>59</sup> Joëlle Beaucamp, *op. cit.*, 1982: 549-551.
  - Wilchen Chrest. 483= P. Lond. 951 v.
  - <sup>61</sup> Giulia Pedrucci, *op. cit.*, 2013: 224.

The second aspect concerns the way Byzantines evaluated breastfeeding by midwives, which depends on the typically Byzantine conceptualization of motherhood. While hagiographical texts restrict themselves to deny the figure of midwife,<sup>62</sup> homiletic literature provides more information. Especially John Chrysostom expressed his condemnation of the practice of midwifery, because mothers have to give their own milk to their sons, in the same way as Christ gave his blood to mankind.<sup>63</sup>

#### V. CONCLUDING REMARKS: FUTURE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

An overall understanding of midwife in Byzantium is far from achieved. When approaching such complex and multi-faceted figures, interdisciplinarity is always the key. In the past years, something has been done, but it is definitely not enough.

The study of such a figure can help understanding more about gender relationships inside and outside the family. As emerged in the previous sections, midwife had a front-row role during central moments of identity foundation of the Christians-to be, so that she was simultaneously conferred an important positioning within the family and the greatest visibility in front of the Christian community, leading to a recognized (even if informal) social prominence. At the same time, the empirical character of midwifery – which was an art mainly passed down from mother to daughter – reiterates that scholastic education was unfeasible for women. Lastly, several of the sources examined in the present article confirm the position of M. Green against the conviction that "women's health was women's business, according to which midwives were the only medical figures to look after female health until the 17th c. Quite the opposite there are evidences about the involvement of (male) doctors in female healings in Byzantium.

- 62 See what is written above about the *Life of Macrina*.
- <sup>63</sup> Io. *In Ps*.50.29-40. *PG* 55, col. 572.
- Holt N. Parker, "Women doctors in Greece, Rome, and the Byzantine empire", in *Women physicians and healers: climbing a long hill*, ed. Lilian R. Furst (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 131-150: 135-136.
- Monica Green, "Medical Practice and Health Care in Medieval Europe", *Signs*, 2 (1989), 434-473: 459.
- In this sense, Byzantine incubation literature (i.e., miracle collections of healing dreams) is a font of information.

Law is undoubtedly another useful perspective to understand more about the social positioning of midwives in (at least early) Byzantium. In her monograph essay on the woman status in Byzantium, J. Beaucamp mentions two juridical cases where the midwife was involved.<sup>67</sup> The first one is the *crimen* or *postulatio suspecti tutoris*, namely the exceptional possibility to postulate against a careless guardian only from those women who were attached to the child through les liens del'affection: in addition to mothers, sisters and grandmothers, also midwives are envisaged. It is clear evidence of the common perception of midwives as quasi-relatives of children. The second case pertains to the huge category of abduction, which was considered among the greatest crimes together with homicide and adultery. The Codex Theodosianus listed the sentences for all the culprits and specifically for those midwives who gave sinful suggestions to women to pour liquefied lead into the mouth and throat is prescribed.<sup>68</sup> The long-standing prejudice of old midwives as perverse and sneaky women seems to underlie this juridical prescription. Finally, as much as the medical education was not regulated by neither a standard curriculum nor a central authority in any case, midwives involved in pseudo-medical practices should have a social recognition of a kind, considering that the most expert ones were called in front of the *praetor* to testify either the pregnancy or the virginity of a woman.<sup>69</sup>

Lastly, the numerous folkloric beliefs around demoniac figures killing children plunge their roots into anthropological mechanisms: in view of the high infant and of parturient women mortality, to transform these dangers and fears into something tangible – namely a bunch of demons such as Empusa, Gello, Lamia and Mormo – that could be opposed gave the illusion of having control of them.<sup>70</sup> F. Mencacci worked on those figures threatening children in the ancient (i.e. Graeco-Roman) image, among

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Joëlle Beaucamp, *Le statut de la femme à Byzance (4-7 siècle), I. Le droit impèrial* (Paris: De Boccard, 1990), 36-37, 109-112.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> CT 9, 21, 1, 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> Dig. 24, 4, 1. Cfr. Ada Nifosi, Becoming a Woman and Mother in Greco-Roman Egypt. Women's Bodies, Society and Domestic Space (London-New York: Routledge, 2019), 54. Such legal advice is attested in the Islamic world too. Cfr. Avner Giladi, op. cit., 2015, p. 121.

Heta Björklund, "A note on the aspects of the Greek child-killing demon", *Classica et Mediaevalia*, 66 (2015), 341-363: 342-343.

which "bad midwives" stand out.<sup>71</sup> She acutely argued that all these folkloric characters reflected the main ambiguities of midwives in the ancient world: the unfamiliarity from the familiar circle, the "civil" – instead of natural – kind of love, money as a potential reason of deviance, the alleged possession of magic powers and the potentially excessive influence that the midwife could exercise on the child.<sup>72</sup>

Such beliefs about the negative alter ego of midwives persist in Byzantium, despite undergoing ideological changes.<sup>73</sup> Since for such misfortunes as the death of a new born or of a parturient (official) Christianity was not able to provide neither satisfying explanations – except for tracing them back to the will of God (as punishments/tests/strengthening) – nor information about how to avoid them, the alternative (and unofficial) traditions were perceived as more concrete answers. They indeed personified such dangers/fears by attributing independent powers to other divine beings – so as to provide a sort of explanation for those phenomena – and suggested magical remedies to hinder them.<sup>74</sup> The need of finding immediate and precise comfort could lead people to resort to unorthodox practices.

To study such folkloric characters can provide (by contrast) a lot of information about what the midwives' expected and ideal model of behaviour was. It is the concept of "relazioni di atteggiamento" (transl: "relations of attitude"), that is to say the

- Francesca Mencacci, "La balia cattiva: alcune osservazioni sul ruolo della nutrice nel mondo antico", in *Vicende e figure femminili in Grecia e a Roma*, ed. Renato Rafaelli (Ancona: Commissione per le pari opportunità fra uomo e donna della Regione Marche, 1995), 227-237: 227-231.
  - <sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*: 232, 235.
- See Maria Patera, *Figures grecques de l'épouvante de l'antiquité au present* (Leiden Boston: Brill, 2015) for a thorough study of these characters and their evolutions in Byzantine folklore. Especially Gello is of interest to the present, since it embodies the anti-ideal of the perfect midwife. See Ign. Diac. *V.Tar.* 5. Ed. S. Efthymiadis, *The Life of the Patriarch Tarasios by Ignatios the Deacon* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 1998), 72-73 and Psell. *Philosoph. Min.* 49. Ed. D. J. O'Meara, *Michaelis Pselli Philosophica minora* (Lipsiae: Teubner, 1989), 164 as examples of how the pagan tradition on this demon was modified in order to comply with Christian teachings.
- Richard Greenfield, "Later Byzantine Depictions and Conceptions of the Devil and the Demons", *Etnofoor, Jaarg. 5*, 1, no. 2 (1992), 61-80: 75.

behavioural scheme attributed to each person based on the familiar relationship with the person he/she engages with.<sup>75</sup> In other words, the negative models come from and are evaluated in comparison to the ideal model, from which they differentiate.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, the Byzantines' conceptualization of midwifery underlain these folkloric negative characters and, conversely, using folkloric tales and characters as a starting point, we can unravel – at least partly – what being a midwife in Byzantium meant.

To conclude, the documentary picture is not as wide as wished, since the literary sources do not give much information about midwives, whose roles in the historical (and daily) reality should have been more relevant than it appears to us. In addition to the gender gap which characterizes ancient sources – written by and for men –, the advent of new cultural models, mainly connected with Christianity, led to the marginalisation of such characters in the sources. In such a condition, trying to valorise the available information is necessary. For this purpose, one has to implement some strategies, such as to abstract *realia* from literary and ideological constructions that might twist the reality in order to: connect the mainly descriptive information contained in the sources with the historical context, enhance the anthropological coordinates of the different contexts, and use the comparison with other civilizations to integrate and complete the collected information. Only a critical reading of this kind will allow to return a cultural picture of Byzantine midwives: definitely a partial and incomplete one, but at least reliable.

Maurizio Bettini, *Affari di famiglia. La parentela nella letteratura e nella cultura antica* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2009), 24.

Mario Lentano, "Parentela", in *Con i Romani. Un'antropologia della cultura antica*, eds. Maurizio Bettini, and William Short (Bologna: il Mulino, 2014), 167-186: 180.

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