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Mater Matuta and Related Goddesses: Guaranteeing Maternal Fertility and Infant Survival in Italic and Roman Italy

In early Roman Italy, female fertility was important for the survival of a family and its name, and the ability to conceive and give birth to a healthy child was related to maternal health. The birth of a child did not necessarily mean that it would survive, and infant health and development were, therefore, also matters of concern. Not everyone had access to professional medical care, nor was it necessarily thought to be any more efficacious than the medical aid that could be given divinely. In this context, the role of the divine world in providing protection for an infant and its mother is important.

My research project as Hugh Last Fellow involved the exploration of divinities associated with fertility, motherhood, and childbirth and relating this to the archaeological record of actual sanctuaries, with special attention paid to Mater Matuta. Furthermore, it investigated the terracotta votive phenomenon and how these thank offerings shed light on the divinities worshipped and their particular skills and properties related to health care from the fourth to the first centuries B.C. Of particular relevance are the votives related to sexual reproduction (uteri, breasts, penises) and fertility and childbirth (swaddled infants). Finally, it aimed to begin the examination of another contemporary form of the votive phenomenon at one particular and unique site, Capua, where stone statues of mothers and infants populated an important suburban sanctuary.

The three month period spent at the BSR allowed me to do an extensive library study of all primary Latin sources referring to Mater Matuta and related Italic or Roman fertility goddesses; all epigraphic evidence for votive dedications to Mater Matuta and related deities; and all published antiquarian and modern scholarship on Mater Matuta and related cults. It also enabled me to record material evidence in the Museo Etrusco Villa Giulia and the Museo Epigrafico in the Terme di Diocleziano in Rome and to compile a large data base from published terracotta votive deposits of offerings relevant to reproduction and infant health. I also had the opportunity to visit the Museo Campano in Capua and the Museo Archeologico dell'antica Capua and photograph all relevant tufa statues of mothers with infants, as well as a selection of terracotta votive offerings, that are on display. This was an important step in preparing for a larger future project on the Capuan mothers.

A preliminary result is the conclusion that a wide and bewildering variety of Italic, Roman, and syncretic goddesses or gods could cure a range of diseases or assist in bodily matters. Anatomical votives of sexual and reproductive organs as well as swaddled infants are associated with a variety of gods, including, but not limited to, Mater Matuta. There is no archaeological basis that sanctuary sites in which votives associated with fertility and childbirth were found were perceived of or can be labelled as 'fertility sanctuaries', or that specific 'fertility cults' existed. As for Capua, although the images of mothers with infants have been interpreted as cult statues of Mater Matuta, they are almost certainly votive offerings to an as yet unknown (female?) deity, and their dedication and deposition can be understood as (rather costly) thank offerings for the fulfilment of pregnancy and maternal and infant health, expressing the reciprocity of the relationship between humans and gods. This almost certainly is related to the

increasingly important social aspect of childbirth and childcare from the fourth century B.C., with the emphasis being on motherhood and the wellbeing and continuity of the family.

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