

ROMAN MOTHERS

TATARKIEWICZ (A.) *The 'cursus laborum' of Roman Women. Social and Medical Aspects of the Transition from Puberty to Motherhood.* Translated by Magdalena Jarczyk. Pp. xii+239, ills. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Cased, £85, US\$115. ISBN: 978-1-350-33739-8.

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T. (in the fluid English translation of Magdalena Jarczyk) makes a useful contribution to the study of motherhood in the Roman world, interweaving medical, legal, literary and material sources to argue that Roman girls became mothers through a gradual process – the '*cursus laborum*' of the title. T. is not examining 'the construct of a mother who has and brings up children, mourns dead children or raises the children of another, or the mother's position in the family, or her role in local or pan-Roman politics'; she is instead 'interested in the mother *in statu nascendi*' (p. 5). This process starts with the birth of a baby girl, then goes to marriage, pregnancy, labour and physical childbirth, and culminates in the social birth of mother and child on the *dies lustricus* – the baby's naming day. T. argues that, since the baby does not become a member of the human community until the *dies lustricus*, its mother cannot attain motherhood until then either.

T. traces the socialisation of girls from puberty to the *dies lustricus* of a first surviving baby. T. acknowledges that our sources come almost exclusively from elite men, and she is careful to remind readers of the resulting limitations throughout her work, though she occasionally lapses and draws more general conclusions. In tandem with her interest in the process of becoming a mother, T. discusses in great detail biological and medical aspects relevant to the stages of the *cursus* and is concerned with how women and babies were treated medically and what was known about their health and physiology. For example, T. connects the centrality of the *dies lustricus* to social birth by evoking the harsh realities of neonatal mortality. As T. informs us, as soon as a baby was born, its chances for survival were assessed by the midwife, and it had neither name nor legal status unless and until it survived to its *dies lustricus* seven or eight days later. In the interim, the remnants of the umbilical cord typically would have dried up and fallen off, according to T. (although current medical sources say it can take up to three weeks). Until that happened, T. argues, the baby was seen as still part of the mother's body and so was viewed as 'more a vegetable than a living being' (p. 151) and the woman as 'not yet a mother' (p. 152). While one can be persuaded by T.'s central argument that the process of becoming a mother was not complete until the *dies lustricus*, it is difficult to imagine that biological birth did not bring one significantly closer to that point than T. is suggesting. If newborn babies were viewed as merely vegetables, why do we have the visual and textual testimonies – many of them alluded to by T. in later chapters – either celebrating their births or lamenting their deaths? T. is to be applauded for making readers aware of how closely social realities were interwoven with, even sometimes dictated by, biological ones, but the latter should not be viewed as bearing equal weight. Surely, in the social creation of 'mother' and 'child' the long, painful and dangerous hours of labour and birth counted for more than the dropping off of the umbilical cord stump.

The forays into the medical and biological material are quite extensive, with long Greek or Latin passages followed by English translations. While these passages are certainly of interest and bring together a wealth of material that is unfamiliar to many students (and even scholars) of Roman history, on occasion they go into more detail than is necessary for T.'s argument,

and they sometimes interrupt her analysis as much as they support it. That said, the biological factors of becoming a mother and the contemporary understanding of those factors are perhaps the most relevant for our knowledge of what young girls and women experienced. In the absence of writings by women, learning what doctors and midwives believed about and did to and for girls and women can bring us closer to understanding their lives.

In the first chapter T. looks at Roman marriage. Aligning herself with S. Treggiari's definition in her influential *Roman Marriage* (1991), T. states that the Latin word for the institution, *matrimonium*, indicates that it was the 'institution that makes one a mother'. T. contends that girls were raised to view marriage and motherhood as desirable goals and that girls' preparation for these roles was part of the process of their becoming mothers. But the first chapter also includes a major subsection, entitled 'Does everyone want to have children?', where T. discusses contraception and abortion and Augustan legislation aimed at inducing reluctant women to have at least three children. These factors nod to the limitations of socialisation, and it is refreshing to see a scholar acknowledge that social and cultural constructs, while powerful forces, do not always prevail.

Chapter 2 traces the life of the pubescent girl preparing for marriage. T. devotes much attention to the medical and cultural ideas concerning menstruation, including its role in nourishing the growing foetus, its beneficial and harmful powers, and the treatment of problematic menstrual cycles. Fertility problems are also discussed, as are the therapeutic, religious and magical measures taken to combat them.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the midwives and other professionals who attended upon women in labour – or at least upon those who could afford them. The professional categories include female and male physicians, but most attention is paid to the midwives, who were not only the most likely to be in attendance, but for whose ideal character, education and techniques we have the extensive testimony of Soranus.

Chapters 4 and 5 take readers through the stages of pregnancy through to birth. Normal and unusual pregnancies are treated, as are miscarriages and the deaths of mothers and *in utero* babies owing to male violence. Likewise, the normal stages of labour are described, as are the attempts to relieve pain and to hasten the birth. Abnormal labour and its attendant dangers occupy a major portion of Chapter 5, with a clear picture painted of the often hopeless efforts to save the mother.

Chapter 6 goes into the postpartum period, covering the care of both mother and newborn, and culminates in describing the final stage of the *cursus laborum* – the *dies lustricus*. T. takes up the possibility of the mother's death during the postpartum period, but greater attention is paid to the newborn, and how its care includes massage, which was believed to help form the limbs. Physically born and shaped into human form, the baby then loses the stump of its umbilical cord. It is now physically a separate entity from its mother and need only undergo the ritual of the *dies lustricus* to be named and made part of its birth family and the wider community. In T.'s view, it is only when the baby has undergone this social birth that the mother can enjoy motherhood.

The volume casts light onto a central aspect of the lives of girls and women in Roman antiquity: the transformation into motherhood. T.'s argument that this was a gradual process shaped by biological realities and the beliefs about them is persuasive, and her inclusion of 'social birth' as an aspect of this transformation will be an important consideration for future researchers. While in my view T. overstates the weight of social birth in relation to physical, and overvalues the significance of the umbilical cord, I found her essential argument to be convincing and her work to be enlightening.

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