

LABOR OF LOVE: CHILDBIRTH AND MIDWIVES IN ANCIENT ROME

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Without modern obstetrical technology, women in Ancient Rome often resorted to midwives to assist in the birth of their child. What role did Ancient Roman midwives play in the birth and rearing of a child? What advice was given to these women who may or may not have access to educational resources?

Ancient Roman Midwives

In Ancient Rome, midwives were valuable to mothers in labor and used by women in the Roman Empire. Not only were midwives involved in the birth of a child, but midwives provided aftercare, women's healthcare, and childcare advice (French 1986). Roman midwives were educated, free women, but men believed women were immodest and therefore best suited to be involved during a messy childbirth (Todman 2007). Midwifery offered a way for Roman women to gain prestige in a world centered around male knowledge and power.

Midwife Relief from the Tomb of Scribonia Attice at Ostia



This relief depicts a midwife assisting in the delivery of a child. Found at Tomb 100, the tomb of Scribonia Attice, this relief indicates that Scribonia might have been a midwife (Ostia: Harbor City of Rome). Other reliefs on the tomb depict other

medical themes, further placing midwifery in the realm of medicine practiced by men.

Duties of a Roman Midwife

- ❑ Looked over infants to determine their overall health and identify any deformities (French 1986)
- ❑ Gave advice about raising or exposing child. In the end, the male head of the house decided if a child should be raised or killed (Todman 2007).
- ❑ Provided abortions and contraceptives for women (Riddle 1992).
- ❑ Severed the umbilical cord and bathed the newborn (French 1986).

Folk Advice

Major contributions in traditional remedies come from Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis*. Midwives serving lower classes would likely utilize Pliny's advice since his texts were easier to access (French 1986).

- Menstrual discharge makes seeds infertile and kills crops (Pliny *HN* 7.13)
- If a woman is pregnant with a male, she will appear healthy and have a less painful birth (Pliny *HN* 7.5)
- If a woman is pregnant with a girl, then she will be pale and have a painful birth (Pliny *HN* 7.5)
- In order to have a male child, a woman should eat rooster testicles (Pliny *HN* 30.43)
- A woman should drink powdered pig feces to relieve labor pains (Pliny *HN* 28.77)



The Ideal Roman Midwife

- ❑ Educated in theory and therapy, aware of hygienic procedures
- ❑ Brave during birth and not scared
- ❑ Sympathetic and reassuring
- ❑ Sober and have a quiet personality
- ❑ Not focused on money
- ❑ Soft hands and short nails

Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.4

Medical Advice

Important advances in the medical side of childbirth came from Soranus' *Gynecology*, the first medical text devoted to women's health (Dunn 1995). With the publishing of his medical texts, Soranus promoted midwifery as a medical field, although one that is different from the male realm



- Menstruation is natural for women, but women who are more active bleed less than sedentary women. (Soranus *Gyn.* 1.22)
- Despite ancient thoughts about determining the sex of the fetus, there is no definite way to tell the baby's sex while in utero (Soranus *Gyn.* 1.46)
- Midwives should put warm oil on the woman's abdomen and labia during labor to offer lubrication and pain relief (Soranus *Gyn.* 2.4)
- Women should give birth on a birthing chair (Banks 1999) and later be transferred to a soft bed to rest (Soranus *Gyn.* 2.2)
- Women should opt for a wet-nurse with medium breasts and good habits (Soranus *Gyn.* 2.19)

After the Birth: Finding a Wet-Nurse

Midwives played a crucial role after the birth of a child by facilitating the hiring of a wet-nurse. A wet-nurse would feed the newborn, sometimes for as long as 18 months (Lefkowitz, "Two contracts..."). These contracts were often ran like a business transaction with the wet-nurse receiving a set amount of pay for her services. Since nursing a child is intimate and crucial, most mothers look for a sober, Greek wet-nurse who is very moderate when taking care of the child (Lefkowitz, "Hiring..."). This will help ensure the child will grow up to be healthy.