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Beerden, K.; Naerebout, F.G.

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ROMAN BREASTFEEDING? SOME THOUGHTS ON A FUNERARY ALTAR IN FLORENCE*

I. THE ALTAR

A funerary altar located at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence (inv. nr. 13831),¹ should attract attention because of a peculiar detail of its iconography (see Figure 1). The woman of the married couple depicted is dressed in what can be called normal female dress: a short-sleeved tunic tied below her breasts, and over her left shoulder and arm a *palla*, which is wrapped around her lower body. However, the tunic has two round cut-outs around the breasts, which in this way stand out very prominently, although they are still covered by what looks like an undergarment or possibly a *fichu* (kerchief). In this short article, we will discuss the possible meaning of this extraordinary garment, in a bid to stimulate some debate.



FIGURE 1

On the front of the altar we see the figures of a man and a woman in a *dextrarum iunctio*; the woman's dress has been described above. In her left hand she holds a pomegranate. The man is dressed in tunic and toga, and in his left hand is a scroll, possibly the *libellus nuptialis*. The short side of the altar on the left

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¹ For permission to publish these images we thank Dr M. Cristina Guidotti of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze, on behalf of the Soprintendente Dr Fulvia Lo Schiavo. For discussion of this altar see: W. Altmann, *Die römischen Grabaltäre der Kaiserzeit* (Berlin, 1905), 272; L.A. Milani, *Il R. Museo Archeologico di Firenze: Sua storia e guida illustrata* (Milan, 1923), 324, no. 147, pl. 58; *Mostra Augustea della Romanità: Catalogo: Bimillenario della nascita di Augusto. 23 settembre 1937-XV–23 settembre 1938-XVI* (Rome, 1937), 604, no. 12; B.M. Felletti Maj, *La tradizione italica nell'arte romana* (Rome, 1977), 319–20, pl. 61, fig. 150 (a clear image of the altar); D.E.E. Kleiner, *Roman Imperial Funerary Altars with Portraits* (Rome, 1987), 130–2; pl. 14, 1–4 (another set of clear images of the altar). The dimensions of the altar are: height 1.21m; width 1.02m; depth: 0.75m. Autopsy was possible at the exhibition 'Glorie van Rome: Burgers, Keizers en Gladiatoren' in De Kunsthall, Rotterdam, 11 October 2008–8 March 2009 (no catalogue).

depicts a maenad with tympanum, that on the right a maenad with thyrsus and pitcher. On the back of the altar we can see an eagle standing on a *patera*, flanked by a pitcher, a garland with ribbons, and a small dog and a bird. The four sides are separated by spiral columns crowned by Corinthian capitals.

The altar's original provenance is unknown; before being included in the Florence collection it was at the Villa de Medici in Rome. On the basis of the hairstyle of the woman, it has been dated to the late Tiberian or Claudian period, but, on the basis of other features, Kleiner supposes that it should rather be dated to A.D. 75–85.²

The altar carries five inscriptions (*CIL* 6.28960); the couple, the two maenads and the dog and bird stand on four plinths, each carrying the same text: *M · Vinicius · Corinthus | Viniciae · Tyche · et · sibi · fecit* (in two different layouts – ‘Marcus Vinicius Corinthus made this for himself and his wife, Vinicia Tyche’); between the man and the woman there is a (quite unusual) secondary inscription: *D · M | M · Vinicio | Casto | Vinicia | Glaphyra | filio · bene | merenti*. The top of the altar has two cavities for urns, once covered by a now missing lid. The wording of the text seems to indicate that Vinicia Tyche predeceased her husband, and that the monument was made when she died. The secondary inscription seems to imply a rededication of the monument by one Vinicia Glaphyra to her son Marcus Vinicius Castus: most likely descendants of Marcus Vinicius Corinthus and Vinicia Tyche.

The couple of the original dedication must have been fairly wealthy in order to have so elaborate a funerary altar made. Their names indicate that they were freedmen, probably manumitted by the same person, Vinicius, and both taking his name. Their own Greek names, now their *cognomina*, Corinthus and Tyche, show their Greek descent and also imply a servile origin.

II. TYCHE'S DRESS

Although our altar has been repeatedly discussed in print, no-one seems to have commented on the circular cut-outs of Tyche's garment, despite the fact that these are clear to see. This remarkable feature could hardly have been overlooked, but not commenting on it of course avoids having to offer an explanation. We now want to attempt a solution, even though we are not archaeologists or specialists in the field of ancient dress. First we attempted to find Roman parallels but, despite going through a large amount of funerary and honorary sculpture, we were unsuccessful: it initially appeared that this was a unique piece in Roman art. Next, we moved further afield: a similarity to anthropoid mummy cases from Egypt came to mind, where somewhat analogous ‘cut-outs’ seem to occur.³ Yet in fact, it is not always easy to make out whether these Egyptian women really have cut-outs in their dresses or wear some variant of a dress with the Isis-knot, are shown

² Kleiner (n. 1), 131.

³ G. Grimm, *Die römischen Mumienmasken aus Ägypten* (Wiesbaden, 1974), pl. 11, 2–4; pl. 12, 1; pl. 111, 1, 3–4; pl. 116, 5–6; pl. 117, 4 and 6; pl. 118, 1–4. For some colour illustrations of the same, see K. Parlasca and H. Seemann (edd.), *Augenblicke: Mumienporträts und ägyptische Grabkunst aus römischer Zeit* (Munich, 1999); M.L. Bierbrier (ed.), *Portraits and Masks: Burial Customs in Roman Egypt* (London, 1997); S. Walker and M.L. Bierbrier (edd.), *Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt* (London, 1997).

bare-breasted or wearing some undergarment, or have their breasts covered with metal 'breast-plates' (the literature mentions 'ornaments'). Also, the dating of this Egyptian material is a problem if one wants to establish any kind of link with our altar.⁴

Could the uniqueness of the altar mean that we are dealing with a fake? This supposition may be supported by the fact that the dress with cut-outs has clear parallels in Italian Baroque theatrical costume, and hence in fantasy costume in figure painting.⁵ However, there is no indication that the funerary altar under discussion is a piece of Renaissance sculpture and its antique origin has never been doubted. The secondary inscription would also be hard to explain. Indeed, one might turn the hypothesis that the altar is a fake on its head, and wonder whether this altar, or sculptural representations like it, could have influenced late Renaissance and early Baroque costume design.

We entertained several other hypotheses: perhaps the cut-outs are not so much dependent upon some earlier example, but were some local and relatively short-lived fashion, and its intent was sexual; or perhaps the woman's apparel is related to some Bacchic cult, as she is holding a pomegranate and the Bacchic motifs on the sides and the back of the altar are so prominent. As to the first theory, it might seem rather strange if a general fashion that made it onto a rather prestigious funerary monument left no further traces at all in either imagery or text. Also, a fashion stressing the breasts as an alluring part of female anatomy would not be what one expects: breasts do not feature prominently in Roman erotic discourse.⁶ Besides, Roman funerary sculpture would not stress a *matrona's* sexuality in such an explicit manner. If aspects of a woman's sexuality, including bodily attractiveness and grace, are expressed, this happens in rather more subtle ways, never losing sight of the female virtues of modesty, fidelity and motherhood (indeed, motherhood may be implied here, as will be argued below). As to the second theory, it is certainly true that Bacchic imagery is common in funerary contexts.⁷ Yet even if husband and wife were eager to advertise their adherence to some Bacchic cult, there need not be any connection between their religious affiliation and their dress. Again, the fact that no parallels at all can be traced seems strange.

⁴ The best parallels have all been dated to the second century A.D.; however, other examples have now been re-dated to 50 B.C.–A.D. 50: see M. Smith, 'Dating anthropoid mummy cases from Akhmim: the evidence of the demotic inscriptions', in Bierbrier (n. 3), 66–71.

⁵ See M. Clarke and C. Crisp, *Design for Ballet* (London, 1978), 65, for a late-sixteenth-century Italian design, possibly from Florence, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; cf. R. Strong et al., *Designing for the Dancer* (London, 1981), 14, for another design in the V&A, of royal French provenance, probably by an Italian artist working in France, such as the Florentine Francini, about 1610.

⁶ W.A. Krenkel, 'Me tua forma capit', *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Universität Rostock* (1984) G-Reihe Heft 9, reprinted in idem, *Naturalia non turpia: Sex and gender in ancient Greece and Rome: Schriften zur antiken Kultur- und Sexualwissenschaft* (Hildesheim, 2006), 315–79, esp. 351.

⁷ Felletti Maj (n. 1), 319, argues for cultic adherence, followed by Kleiner (n. 1). The older interpretation of Bacchic symbolism as purely funerary (e.g. Altmann [n. 1], 272–3; Milani [n. 1], 324) is rather more convincing; see also A. Geyer, *Das Problem des Realitätsbezuges in der dionysischen Bildkunst der Kaiserzeit* (Würzburg, 1977), and, of undiminished importance, F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des Romains* (Paris, 1942).

III. BREASTFEEDING?

There seems to be another, more plausible reading of this monument: that the dress indicates breastfeeding. However, there are no other known examples. In Roman sculpture the portrayal of women suckling a child is not unknown. These women are shown as exposing one breast by lowering their garment, but we do not get any cut-outs.⁸ One possible parallel that we considered are the depictions of the goddesses known as the *Nutrices Augustae* from Poetovio in Pannonia Superior (Ptuj in Slovenia). Yet these depictions are very local, probably to be dated to the third century A.D.⁹ One other possible parallel is not Roman and dates from the mid-sixth century B.C.: the famous statue from Megara Hyblaea on Sicily, depicting a nursing woman or goddess suckling twins – or two children – with what appears to be a dress with circular cut-outs (but without a visible undergarment).¹⁰ We know nothing specific about the Sicilian statue, and because of its early date it can hardly be considered a direct parallel to our altar. However, it does tell us that such cut-outs could be functional for breastfeeding.

Could Vinicia Tyche have been portrayed as a nursing mother? There were some in ancient Rome who deplored the ubiquity of nurses there, and would have mothers nurse their own children, such as the second-century philosopher Favorinus, quoted in Aulus Gellius:

4 ‘Nihil’ inquit ‘dubito, quin filium lacte suo nutritura sit.’ 5 Sed cum mater puellae parcendum esse ei diceret adhibendasque puero nutrices, ne ad dolores, quos in enitendo tulisset, munus quoque nutritionis grave ac difficile accederet, ‘oro te’, inquit ‘mulier, sine eam totam integram matrem esse filii sui. 6 Quod est enim hoc contra naturam imperfectum atque dimidiatum matris genus peperisse ac statim a sese abiecisse? aluisse in utero sanguine suo nescio quid, quod non videret, non alere nunc suo lacte, quod videat, iam viventem, iam hominem, iam matris officia inplorantem? 7 An tu quoque’ inquit ‘putas naturam feminis mammarum ubera quasi quosdam venustiores naevulos non liberum alendorum, sed orandi pectoris causa dedisse?’

‘I have no doubt,’ he said, ‘that she will nurse the baby with her own milk.’ But when the girl’s mother told him that her daughter should be spared this and nurses provided for the boy, so as not to add the burdensome and difficult task of nursing to the pains of childbirth, he said, ‘I beg you, woman, let her be a complete mother of her own child

⁸ The nursing mother was not often depicted in Roman art. For early examples (taking in mothers, *kourotrophoi*, nurses human and divine, and special cases such as Pero and Kimon), see L. Bonfante, ‘Iconografia delle madri: Etruria e Italia antica’, in A. Rallo (ed.) *Le Donne in Etruria* (Rome, 1989), 85–106; for later examples, see L. Bonfante, ‘Nursing mothers in classical art’, in A.O. Koloski-Ostrow and C.L. Lyons (edd.), *Naked Truths: Women, Sexuality and Gender in Classical Art and Archaeology* (London, 1997), 174–96.

⁹ We thank Marenne J.M. Zandstra for suggesting this option and providing the following references: M. Šašel-Kos, ‘Nutrices Augustae’, in eadem, *Pre-Roman Divinities of the Eastern Alps and Adriatic* (Ljubljana, 1999), 153 (non vidimus); K. Wigand, ‘Die Nutrices Augustae von Poetovio’, *Jahreshefte des österreichischen archäologischen Institutes in Wien* 18 (1915), Beiblatt cols 189–218. Cf. M.T. Boatwright, ‘Children and parents on the tombstones of Pannonia’, in M. George (ed.), *The Roman Family in the Empire: Rome, Italy, and Beyond* (Oxford, 2005), 287–318; H.C. Ackermann et al. (edd.), *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae (LIMC)* vol. 6 (1991), s.v. *Nutrices*.

¹⁰ Syracuse, Museo Archeologico Regionale. See G. Pugliese Carratelli et al., *Sikanie: Storia e civiltà della Sicilia greca* (Milan, 1985), figs 174–5 for excellent colour illustrations (175 is a detail of the breasts of the statue, alas reversed). For a discussion of the Sicilian statue and possible connections to a text by Pausanias, see Bonfante 1997 (n. 8), 179.

in every respect. What kind of incomplete, unnatural and half-category of mother is it, to have given birth and then immediately to cast the child away? To have nourished in her womb with her own blood something she did not know and had never seen, and now that she can see it not to feed it with her own milk, now that it's alive and human, crying for its mother's attentions? Or are you one of those who think,' he said, 'that nature gave women their nipples for large beauty spots decorating their breasts rather than in order to feed their babies?'¹¹

Tyche's dress would then either be a realistic depiction of the functional dress of that rare phenomenon, a breastfeeding mother, or it could be symbolic imagery indicating the same thing: here we have a woman who was an ideal mother nursing her own children.¹²

However, if we take her status as a freedwoman into account, we consider it more likely that she herself was a wet nurse, a working woman whose trade is immortalised by her gravestone.¹³ This would, in fact, tie in much better with the context of other funerary altars, on which the deceased were depicted with attributes referring to their daily occupations.¹⁴ The wet nurses we know of were either slaves or freedwomen (some ancient authors, anxious because of the values ingested together with the nurse's milk, especially advocated the use of non-slave labour), and most were Greek.¹⁵ Now of course any wet nurse also had her own child or children to feed, unless they had died or had been removed; so Tyche may have been both: a wet nurse and a mother who nursed her own children (Latin has the expression *collactanei* for those, not brothers or sisters, nursed at the same time by the same woman). She may have done so during, but also after, servility, and possibly even after having become well-to-do.

This altar, then, might be an addition to the little we know about the iconography of nurses. Lacking any clear parallels, as yet this is nothing but an hypothesis – but new evidence might materialise. If we consider the dress to refer symbolically to Tyche's past career as a *nutrix*, it may show her outstanding abilities, breastfeeding two children at the same time. On the other hand, if we consider the cut-outs to be functional, we should consider the possibility that there existed a particular kind

¹¹ Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 12.1.4–7. Translation after N.W. Bernstein, J.F. Gardner and T. Wiedemann. Soranus, *Gynaecia* 2.8–17, 4.9, is ambiguous: he seems to advocate breastfeeding by the mother, but also gives rules for choosing the right nurse.

¹² We find this expressed in an inscription, *CIL* 6.19128, where the wife of an imperial freedman is held up as an exemplar of modesty *quae etiam filios suos propriis uberibus educavit*, 'who even brought up her children with the milk of her own breasts'.

¹³ For a good general overview, see A. Günther, 'Matrone, vilica und ornatrix. Frauenarbeit in Rom zwischen Topos und Alltagswirklichkeit', in T. Späth and B. Wagner-Hasel (edd.), *Frauenwelten in der Antike: Geschlechterordnung und weibliche Lebenspraxis* (Stuttgart, 2000), 350–76.

¹⁴ G. Zimmer, *Römische Berufsdarstellungen* (Berlin, 1982).

¹⁵ On nursing and breastfeeding in ancient Rome, see K.R. Bradley, 'Wet-nursing at Rome: a study in social relations', in B. Rawson (ed.), *The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives* (London, 1986), 201–29; S.R. Joshel, 'Nurturing the master's child: slavery and the Roman child nurse', *Signs* 12 (1986), 5–22; M. Eichenauer, *Untersuchungen zur Arbeitswelt der Frau in der römischen Antike* (Frankfurt, 1988), 274–83; S. Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (London, 1988), 129–35; K.R. Bradley, 'The social role of the nurse in the Roman world', in idem, *Discovering the Roman Family* (Oxford, 1991), 13–37; idem, 'The nurse and the child at Rome: duty, affect and socialisation', *Thamyris* 1 (1994), 137–56; H. Schulze, *Ammen und Pädagogen: Sklavinnen und Sklaven als Erzieher in der antiken Kunst und Gesellschaft* (Mainz, 1998); B. Rawson, *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy* (Oxford, 2003), 120–6. A diachronic perspective is offered by V.A. Fildes, *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford, 1988).

of tunic for wet nurses. Either way, the very fact of depicting this peculiar dress on this monument implies pride in breastfeeding – even from the male perspective of Vinicia’s husband, who erected the monument.

Leiden University

KIM BEERDEN

k.beerden@hum.leidenuniv.nl

FREDERICK G. NAEREBOUT

f.g.naerebout@hum.leidenuniv.nl

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A NOTE ON LIBANIUS EP. 1057 ED. FOERSTER

Εὐδαίμων ὁ γενναῖος ὁ τὰ τῶν ἀρχαίων ποιητῶν εἰδῶς τε καὶ μιμούμενος ἔφη πρὸς με παρὰ σῶν μεμαθηκέναι γραμμῶν ὡς πάνυ ἂν ἡσθεῖης ἡμετέροις γράμμασιν.

Thus Libanius begins a letter dating from A.D. 392 and addressed to the military commander Moderatus (Ep. 1057 ed. Foerster = 186 ed. Norman).¹ In the Loeb edition, A.F. Norman translates as follows: ‘The noble Eudaemon, who both knows and imitates the classical poets, has told me that he has learned by letter from you that you would be very pleased with a letter from me.’ As always, translation tells only a half truth.

Until the verb *ἔφη*, the sentence hovers between the specific and the generic. Eudaemon is a proper name, the friend whom Libanius and Moderatus both know.² But *εὐδαίμων*, placed emphatically at the beginning of the sentence, also evokes the language of the *makarismos*.³ Thus, the first part of the sentence could also be taken as generic blessing of the well-educated: ‘Blessed the nobleman who is both conversant with the work of the ancient poets and imitates them’. This implied *makarismos* of the educated nobleman serves a function. The letter is intended to create ties of friendship between a man of letters and a man of action. The opening suggestively hints at the joys of a life devoted to *paideia*, and by appropriating the language of the *makarismos* it also couches this suggestion in the authoritative language of religion. It thus advances a claim that the man of letters is especially ‘blessed’. Moreover, the generic nature of the *makarismos* language results in a merging of the voice of the author with that of the addressee. Both join in praise of the blessings of *paideia*. In the act of reading, that is, Moderatus himself articulates the admiration for elite *paideia* that is the necessary basis for a friendship between the two men. At the same time, the merging of the voices of

¹ See A.H.M. Jones, J.R. Martindale and J. Morris, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire I: AD 260–395* (Cambridge, 1971), 605, on Moderatus. He probably served as a tribune in Euphratensis.

² See Jones, Martindale and Morris (n. 1), 289–90, on Eudaemon 3. A native of Pelusium, Eudaemon was a poet, sophist and rhetor, who, except for a brief stay in Constantinople, spent most of his life in Egypt.

³ For the *makarismos* in antiquity, see G. L. Dirichlet, *De veterum macarismis* (Giessen, 1914); R.G.M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace Odes Book I* (Oxford, 1970), on *Odes* 1.13.17.