Working Women in Ancient Athens

Compiling evidence for the individual commemoration and acknowledgement of wet nurses as a means of understanding their role and status.

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What do I hope to achieve?

- To successfully bring together the archaeological, literary and epigraphic material in order to compile evidence for the recognition and commemoration of wet-nurses.

- To apply this knowledge to examine the status of the wet-nurse within the household, and also within wider Athenian society.

- To discuss the women who took on this role and what was expected of them.

(Keuls 1985: 139)
What is the importance of studying dedications associated with wet-nurses?

"The Greek and Roman words for nurse (titthe; trophos; nutrix) have the primary meaning of someone who feeds the child"

(Hornblower et al. 2014: 249)
How was the wet-nurse perceived by contemporary society?

"After she had been given her freedom she lived with her husband, but after his death, when she herself was an old woman with nobody to look after her, she came back to me"

(Demosthenes 47.55)
How does this knowledge impact upon the wider study of women?

"The women who are known to us from the formal literature of antiquity are mainly those who belonged to or associated with the wealthy or intellectually elite groups of society" (Pomeroy 1994: xi)

(Kosmopoulou 2001: 310)
Conclusions

- The wet-nurse had the opportunity to become a respected member of a household – most likely as a result of her proximity to family members – and there are examples of nurses being granted their freedom found in ancient sources.

- She was afforded a trust not often given to slaves, and this is evidenced by the number of gravestones erected to commemorate these women in comparison with other roles (such as woolworkers.)

But...

- The ancient sources deem the role of a wet-nurse suitable only for slaves.
- Gravestones commemorating wet-nurses are at odds with other depictions such as those found on vases.


