INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

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Rituals of Mothering in the Middle Ages

Centre for Medieval Arts & Rituals

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This conference is organised in the framework of a two-year research project (2025–2027) entitled 'Maternal Milk: Breastfeeding in Middle and Late Byzantium (8th–15th c.)', implemented under the programme of social cohesion "THALIA 2021-2027" and co-funded by the European Union, through Research and Innovation Foundation.

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ABSTRACTS

Béatrice Caseau, ***Feeding Tired Mothers***

Soranos of Ephesus maintained that feeding an infant with maternal milk was best for the child, though it could cause fatigue for the mother. In Byzantium, breastfeeding was often perceived as physically taxing and potentially detrimental to a woman's appearance. Aristocratic women who could afford it frequently entrusted their infants to wet nurses. To support women who had recently given birth, specific foods were prepared to restore their strength. This paper examines the types of gruel recommended or provided to Byzantine women after childbirth to allow them recover and breastfeed their newborns.

Stavroula Constantinou & Eirini Panou, ***Images of Lactating Mothers from Medieval Crete***

This paper examines the rare but symbolically charged iconography of the nursing Virgin and her mother Anna on the island of Crete during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Drawing on a rich body of visual and textual evidence, it explores how these representations articulated evolving Byzantine notions of mothering. Focusing on key monuments in the regions of Rethymno and Chania – where the majority of the Byzantine population resided, in contrast to Herakleion, which was predominantly inhabited by Venetians – the paper demonstrates how Cretan iconography foregrounded the female body not only as a locus of intercessory power and divine maternity but also as a site of biological function concerned with safeguarding and promoting children's health and wellbeing. Under Venetian rule, Crete developed a sustained visual emphasis on the *Galaktotrophousa* (the Virgin as a nursing mother). This iconographic theme appears in both liturgical and apotropaic contexts and is frequently associated with donor portraits, suggesting its function as visual petition for divine intervention. Recent scholarship has proposed that such depictions may also reflect contemporary anxieties surrounding infant mortality, functioning as quasi-medical appeals for health and protection. In this light, nursing saints emerge not merely as devotional icons but as visual instruments of healing, mobilised within a cultural framework in which religious belief addressed pressing social concerns. Through a feminist lens, the paper reinterprets these portrayals as both personal and collective responses to reproductive precarity, contributing to a broader socio-visual archaeology of mothering in Byzantium. The case study of Cretan visual culture thus reveals a powerful medium for articulating maternal subjectivity, negotiating gendered expressions of piety, and responding to social crises in late Byzantium.

Clément Dussart, ***The Milk Grotto of Bethlehem: Devotion and Rituals***

Among the many traditions venerating the Virgin Mary's breastfeeding in the Holy Land, that of Bethlehem eventually prevailed and eclipsed all others. In this village, a cave near the site of the Nativity came to be identified as the 'Milk Grotto'. According to pious tradition, while the Virgin Mary was nursing her son, a drop of her milk fell to the ground at this location. The veneration of this holy milk as a relic is attested among the Eastern Latins from the early twelfth century; it was with this relic that the bishop of Bethlehem went to the camp of Baldwin II during the siege of Ascalon in 1123. In the following century, Perdica of Ephesus reported that the faithful would collect small stones or dust from this cave to prepare remedies. The Franciscan Filippo Busserio di Savona (born c. 1260) was probably the first to claim that this powder, when mixed with water, was particularly effective in promoting lactation in women. Interest in the 'milk of the Virgin' continued unabated: over the centuries, pilgrims recounted the legend surrounding it, took samples, and brought them home in liquid or powdered form – or as *terra sigillata* – to be consumed as remedies or venerated as relics. The 'milk of the Virgin' was regarded as a sovereign remedy for women in labour and for those experiencing breastfeeding difficulties. Testimonies by the Franciscans Francesco Quaresmio (1639) and Mariano Morone da Maleo (1669) attest that, by at least the seventeenth century, a well-established method of extracting and distributing this precious substance was in place. By that time, the reputation of the 'milk of the Virgin' had extended beyond the Christian world: according to contemporary witnesses, Turkish and Arab women – that is, Muslim women – also made use of it.

Larisa Ficulle Santini, ***Rituals of Un-Mothering: Contraception and Abortion in Byzantium***

If breastfeeding represents the most visible ritual of mothering in Byzantium, the deliberate rejection of maternity – through practices such as contraception and abortion – can be understood as a parallel set of *rituals of un-mothering*. This paper approaches fertility control not as a marginal phenomenon confined to marginalised groups, as much scholarship has suggested, but as a recognised reality that Byzantine law, medicine, and theology both acknowledged and sought to regulate. This paper focuses on the motives attributed to women who sought to avoid motherhood. Legal texts mention adultery, hostility toward a husband, or financial calculation; medical writings point to health-related concerns; and in underexplored sources, such as certain *akolouthiai*, we even find references to a simple lack of desire for procreation. By tracing these motives and the practices associated with them, the paper seeks to broaden the discussions of maternal rituals to include their deliberate refusal, interruption, or postponement. Such acts of *un-mothering* do not stand outside Byzantine experience but rather occupy the opposite end of the same spectrum that defined women's reproductive lives.

Isabel Grimm-Stadelmann, ***Rituals of Mothering: Contextualisation of the Egyptian Motif of Isis and Harpokrates in Byzantine Therapeutic Literature***

Numerous facets of the mother-child relationship between the Egyptian goddess Isis and her young son Horus/Harpokrates were adapted, revisited, and reinterpreted in Byzantine medical literature. This complex of motifs functioned as a powerful *iatromagical* amulet tradition, transmitted from Greco-Egyptian and Coptic ritual texts. On the one hand, the child Horus/Harpokrates is regarded as the embodiment of the 'model patient' par excellence, serving as a ritual reflection of the human patient; on the other hand, as the childlike saviour of the world, he is identified with Christ in many healing amulets and therapeutic concepts. A particular focus within this motif appears in the context of digestive disorders and colic. The Egyptian Harpokrates, in his childlike exuberance, often consumes foods he cannot tolerate and must therefore be repeatedly rescued from painful affliction by his mother Isis, who is equally proficient in magic and healing. Another significant and widely attested facet of the mother-child motif – especially prominent in the late Byzantine medical recipe books known as *iatrosophia* – emerges in gynaecological and obstetric contexts, particularly in amulets that, following Egyptian tradition, are associated with so-called 'milk magic'. Here, Harpokrates symbolises the newborn child dependent on human milk, whose production must be ritually ensured and protected from drying up. Such 'milk spells' are not confined to the Greco-Egyptian-Coptic milieu but are taken up again in Christian adaptations (Isis – Harpokrates = Mother of God – Jesus Christ), where they persist as a popular motif in late Byzantine therapeutic literature. A striking variation on this mother-child theme is the recurrent assertion in numerous medical and *iatromagical* sources that human breast milk may be substituted with donkey's milk. This substitution is particularly noteworthy (perhaps even apotropaic), given that in Egyptian ritual tradition the donkey represents the demonic god Seth, the mortal enemy of the youthful Horus/Harpokrates. This paper examines the various motifs and chains of motifs associated with the ritual constellation of Isis and Harpokrates and analyses their contextualisation within Byzantine medical and *iatromagical* literature.

Piruza Hayrapetyan, ***Mothering for Sinners: The Virgin's Love and Grief in the* Apocalypse of the Theotokos**

The *Apocalypse of the Theotokos* (BHG 1050–1054m, CANT 327), likely composed between the seventh and ninth centuries, became a highly influential moral apocalypse within Byzantium and its wider cultural sphere. Translated into Armenian – probably between the tenth and twelfth centuries – it developed into a distinct and dynamic Armenian tradition (BHO 646–652). The text recounts the Virgin's heavenly journey through the places of punishment, guided by the Archangel Michael. Along the way, she encounters sinners – both lay and clerical –

responsible for theological, ecclesiastical, moral, and sexual transgressions. At the end of her tour, moved by their suffering, she implores Michael to be punished alongside them, a plea she reiterates before God the Father. Her self-offering – a willingness to share in the sinners' suffering and fate and, by implication, to bear the weight of their transgressions – thus emerges as a defining feature of her role as intercessor. Furthermore, in both appeals she designates the sinners as 'the children of her Son'. Several Armenian versions go further, rendering them 'the brothers of her Son', thereby forging a maternal bond between the Virgin and sinners. Her proposed co-suffering is therefore framed as co-suffering specifically with her own kin. This paper analyses the theological, moral, and rhetorical implications of this reframing, asking how this dynamic of kinship and co-suffering reshape the Theotokos' intercession and advocacy for sinners and reconfigure the moral boundaries between her and them. It further examines how her mothering for sinners is performed: how her maternal love and grief are bodily enacted and ritually staged. Drawing on manuscript evidence, it demonstrates that these motifs underwent nuanced editorial adjustments in both the Byzantine and Armenian versions, revealing shifts in theological emphasis and interpretative strategy.

Cecily Hennessy, ***Does Your Mother Know? Mothers and Mothers-in-law as Guides to Young Imperial Brides***

This paper examines what is known about the ways in which mothers and mothers-in-law did – or did not – take on the role of guiding young brides. It focuses on examples of girls who married into and out of the Byzantine imperial family. A key source is the account of the visit of Olga, the *archontissa* of Kievan Rus, to the court of Emperor Constantine VII and Empress Helena, as recorded in the *Book of Ceremonies*. Present to receive her were not only Empress Helena but also her daughters and her daughter-in-law, most likely the young Bertha Eudokia, aged five or six. Bertha Eudokia had, about a year earlier, married Romanos II, the junior emperor, who was only two years her senior. We also have an example of a marriage arranged by a woman. Mariam, the mother of Bagrat IV, king of Georgia, personally travelled to Constantinople to arrange the marriage between her son and Helena, the niece of the newly enthroned Byzantine emperor Romanos Argyros. Helena later travelled to Georgia with Mariam to be married at Bana in 1032. A few decades later, Mariam again travelled to Constantinople, this time accompanying Bagrat's daughter (by his second wife), the future Maria of Alania, who was then a toddler. Maria was kept at the court of Empress Theodora, seemingly as a kind of political hostage, although this was not explicitly stated. Maria of Alania later married Michael VII and herself took on responsibility for two young girls, both successively betrothed to her son, Constantine Doukas: first, Helena Olympias, daughter of Robert Guiscard, and second, Anna Komnene, who appears to have lived with Maria from the age of eight until Constantine's

death a few years later. It is often disquieting to observe how these young brides were sent away or received at the Byzantine court. The historical record generally mentions only the political, courtly, and ecclesiastical men charged with overseeing their welfare, with little reference to the women – particularly mothers – who accompanied them. Yet occasional glimpses in the sources reveal how mothers or mothers-in-law of future empresses or queens participated in marriage negotiations and in the upbringing and education of these girls, preparing them to navigate the intricate rituals of courtly and religious life.

Kallirroe Linardou, ***'Icons' of Mothering: Komnenian Females and the Performance of Motherhood***

Taking as its point of departure visual and literary representations – illuminated narratives, portable icons, and epigrams from the first half of the twelfth century – this paper explores how such images bear witness to the performance of mothering among aristocratic women in the Komnenian milieu. It examines how the three demands of mothering identified in specialised scholarship – preservation, growth, and social acceptance – intersect with the 'icon' of the good mother promoted through the visual and literary tropes of the period. It is argued that these maternal practices not only reinforced prevailing social expectations but also served as arenas of negotiation at the intersection of class and gender identities for Komnenian women.

Savvas Mavromatidis, ***Representations of Motherhood in the Funerary Art of Late Medieval Cyprus***

This paper explores the various ways in which the notion of motherhood is inscribed in works associated with funerary arts and rituals in Lusignan Cyprus (1192–1474/89). Through an examination of iconography and inscriptions, it brings to light different manifestations of maternal identity – biological, spiritual, and symbolic – as represented primarily in the island's funerary sculpture, but also in funerary painting. The discussion further seeks to uncover the values with which medieval society endowed the concept of motherhood, while also addressing issues of patronage in certain works in order to clarify the relationships between the represented and the commemorated figures.

Corinna Peres, ***Freedom Through Lactation: Slavery, Breast Milk, and Social Mobility in Renaissance Italy***

This paper examines the role breast milk played in the experiences of enslaved Greek women in Italy during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It argues that the practice of hired wet nursing, which flourished in the cities of the late medieval Western Mediterranean, 'allowed' some enslaved women to use their lactating breasts as a form of currency to negotiate the

terms – especially the duration – of their enslavement. In certain cases, hired breastfeeding arrangements included provisions for conditional manumission: the enslaved woman would nurse a 'contract baby', either her owner's child or that of a third party's, for a set period, receiving part of the wages to cover manumission fees and to assemble a dowry with which to marry, as a freed Greek woman, into the society of her former enslavers. The commodification of breast milk and the labour of breastfeeding could thus create a tangible pathway to freedom. Yet this route was embedded in a history of violence. Lactation often followed conception through sexual coercion, isolated pregnancy, and potentially dangerous childbirth, culminating in the enforced separation from the woman's own infant. In late medieval Italy, a wet nurse was required to give her breast milk exclusively to the 'contract baby'. This paper therefore contends that the path to freedom for enslaved lactating women comprised three distinct sequences of 'mothering': the denial of mothering their biological child; the socially sanctioned mothering of an employer's child; and, as freed women, the potential to mother their own subsequent children and others' children as hired wet nurses. Drawing on letters, wills, court records, registers, statutes, and legal texts, the paper further situates, from a microhistorical perspective, the practice of gaining manumission through lactation within the legal frameworks regulating the 'freedom' of enslaved people in Renaissance Italy – where the enslavement and continued possession of Greeks became increasingly controversial under the influence of religious discourse and the intervention of the Byzantine emperor on behalf of his subjects. By bringing together slavery studies, kinship studies, and social and legal history, the paper offers a historiographical intervention that considers breast milk as a medium of social mobility, network formation, and power beyond courtly contexts.

Gabriella Zuccolin, *Maternal Breastfeeding in Michele Savonarola's* Mother's Manual

This paper investigates the rationale underlying Michele Savonarola's defense of maternal breastfeeding in the *De regimine praegnantium – Mother's Manual* (ca. 1460), a vernacular treatise on pregnancy, obstetrics, and pediatrics explicitly addressed to midwives and birthing mothers. An academically trained physician educated at Padua and later court physician to the Este family in Ferrara, Savonarola articulates his position through a complex synthesis of past medical, philosophical, and religious authorities. These sources are integrated within a dialogical framework intended to engage directly with the female audience of the text – namely mothers, wet nurses, and midwives – whose expertise is sometimes explicitly acknowledged as integral to the medical discourse the physician is constructing.