

Larissa Bonfante - October 22nd, 1988

Mothers & Children in the Art of Ancient Italy

The statue type

Phoenician, by the king to Uni (=Hera)-Ishtar because the goddess has held him in her hand for 3 There are also dedications to Aphrodite (Venus), Demeter, and Hera, as well as to other mother goddesses.

A few Roman examples: the Ara Pacis of Augustus preserves the Italian tradition with its female figure (probably = Tellus, with 2 babies; she is not nursing the babies at the moment, but her gown is coming off and nursing looks imminent. On a Roman sarcophagus showing the life of a child, the first thing depicted is a kourotrophos. Funerary stelae of Roman soldiers often show the family unit, wives and children.

In Greece, scenes of children are not as frequent outside of funerary representations. Sometimes the representation is father and child, sometimes mother and child, but the contact is more through the eyes than through nursing or even touching. Such nursing scenes as do exist are Aphrodite and Eros. Adoption scenes are shown simply by a child (especially Dionysos) being handed over; the lady normally has a wet-nurse at hand.

Why did the Greeks not show kourotrophoi? Rich ladies may not have wanted to spoil their figures. Nurses were normally shown as ugly. Lower class women nurse children (in medieval and renaissance art wild women) or else the figures are allegorical. In Greece, the life of a woman was more private so you do not show mothers and children often. Perhaps the greater prominence of mother goddesses in Italy provided a religious reason for Italian kourotrophoi. Perhaps a sense of magic was involved in shocking/powerful mages; the exposure of the breasts was too important in Greek life to be shown in art. This magical use (often apotropaic) may have been akin to attempt to prevent Orestes from killing her; she exposed to him the breasts that nursed him.