

Grandmothers in Roman Antiquity: A Note on *Avia Nutrix* (AE 2007, 298)

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1. Archaeological and paleographical description of a peculiar inscription

At the necropolis site of Isola Sacra, the excavations of Portus near the present-day Roman airport of Fiumicino, stands an altar in white marble, to be found on the Via Flavia, near the house of the guardsman at the right of the entrance gate. The height of the altar is 94.5 cm., the width 33-38 cm. and the depth 20.2-25 cm. It consists of an arched pediment with two acroteria (in which the letters DM are incised), a triple molding, a framework with Latin inscription and a base which is again triple. The dimensions of the epigraphic field are 45.4 x 24 cm. The letters (2-3.3 cm.) appear regular and are deeply carved, with triangular interpunction to denote word destination throughout. A jar (*urceus*) is depicted on the left side of the monument, a bowl



(*patera*) on the right side. There are traces of carving on the left side. The origin of this altar which was found during excavations after the Second World War is unfortunately unknown.

Both description and edition of the text have been carried out carefully by Pekka Tuomisto, in a volume which contains the full collection of the inscriptions of Isola Sacra by a team of the Finnish university of Jyväskylä.¹ However, the commentary on this inscription is rather succinct and could have been expanded since the text contains quite unique information. As such, this paper should be viewed as an attempt to bring epigraphy closer to socio-cultural history, more specifically to the study of the Roman family. In an exercise of historically informed imagination, I want to sketch possible scenarios which might have been behind the story of a woman who is called both grandmother (*avia*) and wet-nurse (*nutrix*).²

2. Text and commentary

*D(is) M(anibus) / Cl(audiae) Beruti / aviae et nutri/ci suae dulcis/sime
Ti(berius) Cl(audius) Ma/ximus et Cl(audia) Ma/trona nepotes / eius melius
/ merenti / fecerunt.*

To the spirits of the departed. The grandchildren
Tiberius Claudius Maximus and Claudia Matrona set
this up for their most sweet grandmother and nurse
Claudia Berus, who had deserved better.

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1 Heltulla, Gestrin, Kahlos, Pentti-Tuomisto, Tuomisto, Vainio and Valjus (2007) 354 n. 363. Epigraphists have denoted this edition with the abbreviation *ISIS*. *ISIS* 363 should be read together with the note in *Année Epigraphique*: *AE* 2007, 298.

2 For a recent approach of historically informed imagination and captivating scenarios, see Nouwen (2014), based on 35 inscriptions belonging to the Gallo-Roman provinces.

As Tuomisto remarks, the female name Berous is common in its Greek form in the Egyptian papyri from the first century BCE to the third century CE.³ It appears nowhere else in Latin epigraphy, though it is attested in a Greek epigraphical text from Crete, on a stele of Attic import or the work of an Attic sculptor active on the island, or a Cretan imitation of an Attic stele of about 340-325 BCE.⁴ In the same way as for the Cretan inscription, we may suspect an Egyptian origin or at least an Egyptian connection for Claudia Berus. Her name even offers more clues. She was most probably granted Roman citizenship during the reign of Emperor Claudius (41-54) or Nero (54-68), together with her husband who consequently bore the same name. As grandchildren in the paternal line also Maximus and Matrona share the *nomen gentilicium* Claudius.⁵

The combination *melius merenti* is remarkable: in fact, it only occurs in this inscription.⁶ From the point of view of Latin grammar, the possessive *eius* is a bit superfluous, though not mistaken. In line 5, *dulcissime* is a well known variant for the dative *dulcissimae*.

What is most peculiar, however, is the combination of *avia* and *nutrix*. Before the edition of this inscription, we only knew of one similar case. In an inscription from Verona, Postumia Paulina is described as the grandmother and nurse of Cavarasia Faustina. In this inscription are also mentioned Postumia Paulina's husband Cavarasius Secundus, and their two sons Cavarasius Maximianus and Cavarasius Aurelianus. Cavarasia Faustina must have been the daughter of either Maximianus or Aurelianus.⁷

3 Tuomisto refers to Preisigke (1922) 74.

4 Baldwin Bowsky (1997).

5 The paternal line is the most likely possibility, unless we suppose that a daughter of Claudia Berus married to a man who also bore the *nomen gentilicium* Claudius - a scenario which cannot be excluded given the frequent occurrence of the name Claudius.

6 As remarked by Salomies in *AE* 2007, 298.

7 *CIL* 5, 3710: *D(is) M(anibus) / Postumiae / Paulin(a)e M(arcus) Ca/varasius Secun/dus co(n)iu(g)i incom/parabil(i) quae vixit me/cum ann(os) XXXVII sine qu(a)er/rella ulla et sibi v(iuus) f(ecit) et / Marcii(!) Cavarasii Maxi/mianus et Aurelianus ma/tri b(ene) m(erenti) et Cavarasia Faus/tina aviae et nutrici suae*. For presentation of this inscription, see Donaduzzi Marcon (1947) 103 and Soffredi (1954) 53 and 56.

As can be gleaned from all major Latin dictionaries, *nutrix* sometimes refers to the mother herself, in her capacity of providing milk.⁸ It is important to notice that a certain ambivalence in the use of the term *nutrix* has always been present in Latin. As such, Augustine is eager to stress that the biblical phrase *tanquam nutrix fovens filios suos* (1 *Thess.* 2.7) refers to mothers. According to this exegetical commentary, Saint Paul did not write *mater* because many mothers were known not to nourish their children themselves. But, by the addition *filios suos*, he made clear that he was not thinking of hired nurses who took care of a child that was not their own.⁹ There are some instances in the epigraphic record of women being described as both mothers and nurses of their charges.¹⁰ According to Keith

8 Since there is still no *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* lemma on *nutrix* available, the most thorough lexicological treatment is Vons (2000) 63–65. The same equation between *mater* and *nutrix* is found in Christian inscriptions. See Janssens (1981) 181–183.

9 Augustine, *Enarratio in psalmum* 49, 27 (PL 36, 582) *Mater vobis fui: quomodo dicitur alio loco: Factus sum parvulus in medio vestrum, tamquam nutrix fovens filios suos* (1 *Thess.* II, 7). *Non nutrix nutriens filios alienos, sed nutrix fovens filios suos. Sunt enim matres quae cum pepererint, dant nutricibus: illae quae pepererunt, non fovent filios suos, quia nutriendos dederunt; illae autem quae fovent, non suos fovent, sed alienos: iste vero ipse pepererat, ipse fovebat, nulli nutrici quem pepererat committebat; dixerat enim: Quos iterum parturio, donec Christus formetur in vobis* (Gal 4, 19). The same argument in Augustine, *Sermo* 4/A (PL 39, 1732) and *Sermo* 23, 3 (PL 38.156). See Laes (2016).

10 CIL 6, 18032: *D(is) M(anibus) P(ublio) Flavio / Crescenti / P(ubli) Flavi Amaranthi filio / vix(it) an(nos) VII d(ies) I hor(as) X / Flavia Euphrosyne / mamma idem nutrix / fecit*; CIL 6, 21347: *D(is) M(anibus) / Licinniae / Processae / matri piae / nutrici dulcissimae Cres/cens fecit*; CIL 6, 23078: *Novell[i]ae Atticillae / Q(uintus) Novellius Clust(umina) Calli/nicus filius / matri et nutrici / fecit // Sepulc(h)rum / Novelliaes(!) Atticillaes(!)*; CIL 9, 1154: *Cantriae P(ubli) fil(iae) / Paullae sacerdoti / Augustae Aeclano / Cn(aeus) Ennius Dexter matri / et nutrici suae fecit / haec argenteam statuam Felicitatis / Aeclani dedit* (obviously a family of some means in the town of Aeclanum, since the mother was a priest of the imperial cult); CIL 6, 32049 = CLE 702 = ICUR 1, 3250: *Hic requiescit in pace Turtura c(larissima) f(emina) dulcis Petroni coniu(n)x / deo serviens unice fidei amica pacis castis moribus ornata / communis fidelibus amicis familiae grata nutrix natorum / et numquam amara marito quae vixit pl(us) m(inus) ann(os) XXXVII* (only lines 1–4 of the inscription are cited here); CIL 6, 34043 = CIL 9, 4864 = ICUR 9, 23968: *Haliciae S(e)l(verae) matri / et nutrici / dulcissimae / feminae b(ene) m(erenti)* (a Christian inscription from the catacombs of Via Salaria Nova); CIL 14, 1539: *D(is) M(anibus) / Ragoniae / Eutythiae matri / piissimae et / nutrici / [---]us Firmus* (from Roman Ostia). CIJ 1, 459: *Benedicte Mariae, / vere benedicte / matri et nutrici. εν εἰρήνῃ* (from the Hebrew catacombs in Monteverde). In one instance, it is difficult to know whether *nutrix* means mother or not, see CIL 6, 21151 = CLE 398: *Lasciva verna / Q(uinti) Sulpici*

Bradley, such cases indicate that these mothers preferred to nurse their own children themselves rather than to make use of a wet-nurse. He suggests that in some social circles maternal breastfeeding was considered unusual, and hence worthy of explicit mention on an inscription.¹¹ The Latin phrase *et nutrices et matres* also appears in a remark by Varro on female pastoral slaves who in most cases suckle and bear their own offspring.¹²

3. Imaginative scenarios

Surely, the compiling of an historical and philological commentary with the indication of parallel passages is helpful in elucidating various aspects of the inscription. On the other hand, quite some questions remain. While it will prove ultimately impossible to resolve these issues, the sketching of historically informed imaginative scenarios brings us closer to the experience of what could have formed a Roman family.

3.1 Missing family links: indicative silence

A first and obvious question is why it is only the two grandchildren who commemorate their grandmother. It is a well known feature of

*Abascan/ti quae nondum sep/tem compleverat an/nos quae caruit luce / et tenebris se miscuit / atris Lasciva nimium / fatis crudelibus orta est / liquit et orbatos miser/os fidosque parentes / uberibus pressis nutri/cem liquit amantem / coniunx nutricis infel/ix ille relictus maeret / et ad cineres plangit / sua pectora palmis nec / satis ereptam lucem sibi / [---. If *nutrix* indeed refers to mother, *coniunx nutricis* would then have been used as a synonym for father, which seems rather unlikely but is not impossible in a metrical epitaph. In other instances, the two functions are clearly distinct, as e.g. in CIL 6, 12366: *D(is) M(anibus) / Cn(aeo) Arrio Agapeto / Arria Agapete mater / et Bostrychus pater / Ft Helpis mamma et / fiEi(a)e nutrix filio / pientissimo b(ene) m(erenti) f(ecit) / vixit a(nnis) III diebus / XXXXV; CIL 6, 23589; D(is) M(anibus) / Oscia Sabina / Threpto alumno / nutrix infelicissima / Lamyra mater fecerunt: in both cases the *nutrices* are clearly slave women.**

11 Bradley (1991) 14-16.

12 Varro, *Agr.* 2, 10, 8: *De nutricatu hoc dico, easdem fere et nutrices et matres.* Cf. CIL 6, 19128 where the imperial freedman Pudens praises his wife Graxia Alexandria who had suckled her child with her own breasts: *Graxiae Alexandriae / insignis exempli / ac pudicitiae / quae etiam filios suos / propriis uberibus educavit / Pudens Aug(usti) lib(ertus) maritus / merenti vix(it) ann(os) XXIII m(enses) III d(ies) XVI.*

Roman commemorative inscriptions that they tend to stress nuclear family relationships. As such, grandparents are epigraphically only rarely attested.¹³ In the cases of children not being commemorated by their parents, it would rather be individuals outside the extended family grouping (as friends or dependents) than grandparents who were to commemorate. The same tendency, combined with the demographical conditions (see paragraph 3.2), explains the rareness of grandparents being commemorated themselves.¹⁴ To the Roman epigraphic habit, the commemoration of a grandmother by her two grandchildren must thus have stood out as somewhat remarkable. As Beryl Rawson stated (see note 13), grandparents could be useful supplementary carers or custodians: they were visible especially in situations in which children had lost their parents.

The same situation may apply to our inscription under scrutiny. Indeed, in some epitaphs the bare fact that certain persons are not mentioned can be revealing of the reality which lies behind the inscription. An epitaph from Rome for Flavius Gamus who died at age thirteen mentions his grandfather, his father and his wet-nurse. The boy was certainly motherless (be it due to death or parental divorce) when he passed away.¹⁵ In another inscription, two-year-old Iuvenalis is commemorated by his *nutrix* and his grandmother. The striking absence of both parents in all likelihood testifies of an gruesome infancy without mother and the constant care of the grandmother to provide the infant with milk, while the father for

13 Rawson (2003) 241 mentions some thirty commemorations for grandparents in the City of Rome, the majority of which is for grandmothers. Gallivan, Wilkins (1997) 268 table 10.10 count 39 epitaphs involving grandparents and grandchildren for Roman Italy (without Rome): more grandfathers are attested in this case.

14 Parkin (2003) 52-54. The classical study on commemoration and family patterns is Saller and Shaw (1984). Note that a general study on Roman grandparents (let alone on epigraphical commemoration of grandparents) is still lacking, despite the promise by Parkin (2003) 330 note 55. For Christian inscriptions from Rome, see the useful account by Janssens (1981) 169-170. See also Krause (1994-1995) vol. 3: 67-73 for grandmothers in the case of a deceased mother.

15 CIL 6, 18073: *Dis Manibus / Flavio Gamo vix(it) / ann(os) XIII fecer(unt) / T(itus) Flavius / Abascantus / a(v)us et / M(arcus) Cocceius / Philetus pater et / Flavia Nais / nutrix.*

whatever reason was not there to look after the baby.¹⁶ In the same way, though less dramatically, I suggest that at the time of her death, grandmother Claudia Berus was widowed or divorced, and had already lost her son and daughter-in-law. Only the parentless Tiberius Claudius Maximus and Claudia Matriona remained to render her the appropriate honours by erecting a commemorative stone.

3.2 The question of age

No ages are mentioned on our inscription, though they obviously make a significant difference for creating imaginative scenarios.

Demographically, age at first marriage for women in Roman society was in their late teens, while men married for the first time at their mid twenties or somewhat later.¹⁷ Consequently, a woman might become grandmother by her daughter when she was not even forty years of age herself. In the case of becoming a paternal grandmother, age 45 seems a more likely minimum age, but even there, younger ages were possible.¹⁸ On the other range of the scale, at age ten only 16% of the Roman children would have their paternal grandmother alive; at age twenty this would drop to 4%, while at age thirty only 1% of the population still had a paternal grandmother. The mean age for such grandmothers would be 67.5 when the grandchildren were aged ten, 75 when they were twenty and 81.4 when the grandchildren had reached age thirty. Obviously, the numbers are quite different in the case of a maternal grandmother: 33% at age ten, 15% at age twenty and 4% at age thirty knew their grandmother, whose mean age would have been respectively 61.2, 68 and 75.1 years of age.¹⁹

16 CIL 2, 20938: *Dis Man(ibus) / Iuvenalis / v(ixit) a(nnos) II m(enses) III d(ies) IX h(oram) I / Canuleia Tyche / avia et / Erasena Libas / nutrix fecer(unt) / et sibi et suis.*

17 Scheidel (2007) summarises the extensive literature on the subject. While one can presume considerable local variations or social differences, the overall pattern is clear and undeniable.

18 According to the WHO Model Life Tables (in this case we use Female Ordinary Level 3 West), 4 % of women would be grandmother at the age of forty, and 25 % at the age of 45. See Saller (1994) 49.

19 Using the same Model Life Table, see Saller (1994) 49-50.

With all this in mind, it is rather unlikely -- though surely not impossible -- that Tiberius Claudius Maximus and Claudia Matriona were still children when they had their grandmother commemorated. In their childhood, the chance of one of their parents still being alive was considerable, and if so, they would almost certainly have been mentioned in the text. Demographically speaking, Maximus and Matriona were more likely to be parentless from the age of twenty on.²⁰ It is not sure whether at that moment they were married or not: their respective wife and husband never had such close ties with grandmother Berus, and therefore they could have decided to just put their two names on the stone. Temptatively, we may estimate that in the case of Maximus and Matriona being about twenty, Berus was approximately 75 when she passed away in case she was a paternal grandmother, and about 68 when she was a maternal grandmother (see note 5).

3.3 Berus' educational role

However, the word *nutrix* explicitly refers to childcare in the early years. So what role had Berus played during Maximus and Matriona's childhood years? At first glance, the suggestion by Bradley seems by far the most likely: her function as nurse was more custodial and she simply raised, or helped to raise, her grandchildren.²¹

Classical literature now and then offers examples of involvement of grandparents, and more specifically grandmothers, in the educational process. Pliny the Younger mentions Ummidia Quadratilla, who died nearly 79 years old. She left her will to her grandson, at that moment a married man older than 24 years of age, and to her granddaughter. She is described as an *avia delicata*: as a Roman lady she indulged too much in pantomime players and games -- vices from which her virtuous grandson was carefully kept away. Surely, the young man's parents were not alive anymore at the moment Ummidia Quadratilla died, but we are not informed about the moment her close involvement

20 Again using the same table, 81 % had one parent alive at age twenty, 70% at age 25.

21 Bradley (1991) 14-15, on the case of Postumia Paulina (cf. supra note 7). Dasen (2015) 250 suggests another interpretation, cf. infra note 33.

with her grandchildren's education actually started.²² In the higher classes in the City of Rome, lady Oscia Modesta is commemorated by her grandson and called an *avia carissima et educatrix dulcissima*.²³ References to grandparents influential in education continue well into Late Antiquity.²⁴ In the census documents of Graeco-Roman Egypt, we meet three-generational households composed of parents, children and grandparents, but there is no single example of grandparents rearing their grandchildren all by themselves.²⁵ We have to wait for late ancient evidence for an example of a fourteen-year-old girl who after the death of her parents lived with her grandmother.²⁶ In all these cases, we lack any specific information about possible educational involvement in the early childhood years.

When Quintilian laments the loss of his ten-year-old son (after he had already lost his wife who was only nineteen years of age, and another little son aged five), he remembers his darling son: "preferring

22 Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 7, 24. On Ummidia Quadratilla, see among a plethora of literature, Hemelrijk (2015) 109-110.

23 *CIL* 6, 1478: *Osciae Modestae M(arci) [f(iliae)] / Corneliae Publian[ae] / C(ai) f(iliae) / aviae carissimae [et] / educatrici dulcissim[ae] / M(arcus) Fl(avius) Arrius Osciu[s] / Honoratus nepo[s] / IIIvir trib(unus) [mil(itum) leg(ionis)]*. See Schade (2002) 261 for further references. Often, the terms *educator/ educatrix* refer to a person contrasted with parents and teachers who independently rears a child. See Bradley (1991) 49 for a nuanced discussion. In *CIL* 6, 9792 a husband commemorates his partner who had been the *educatrix* of a senatorial boy: *D(is) M(anibus) / praecedere voluisti sanctissima coiu[x] / ut me relinqueres in lac(h)rimis / si est aliquit in infernas partes bene / ego autem sine te vitam sordidam exigo / esto felix et ibi dulcissima Thalassia / educatrix c(larissimi) v(iri) et mihi in conuivio per annos XXXX / Papirius Vitalis arte pictoria maritus eius / feminae incomparabili fecit sibi et suis*.

24 See the indices s.v. grandparents in Vuolanto (2015). These grandparents were influential for the option for ascetic life of their grandchildren.

25 Huebner (2013) 73 calls such households "not uncommon" with 15.3 %. See also the indices of Huebner (2013) for instances of grandparents in the papyri. In *P. Oslo inv.* 1482 (third century) a certain Aurelius A[-], alias Aphynchis makes a complaint to the police of having been treated with insolence and assaulted by a certain Didyme. He calls into witness some of his daughter's sons. Did they actually live with him in the same house? As often, the evidence does not tell us. See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2825481/Childhood-ancient-Rome-2-000-year-old-Papyri-reveal-scout-clubs-young-slaves-freedom-apprentices.html> for some speculations.

26 Marcus Diaconus, *Vita Porph.* 101 (PG 65, 125-126). See Krause (1994-1995) vol. 4, p. 29.

me to his nurses, to his grandmother who brought him up, and all those who, as a rule, win the special affection of infancy the boy chose his father above the educators" (trans. H. E. Butler).²⁷ Here we find a rare instance of a grandmother's involvement in the education of a young grandchild. There also is the case of Emperor Vespasian, who was brought up under the care of his paternal grandmother Tertulla on her estates at Cosa. Even after he became emperor he used constantly to visit the home of his infancy, where the manor house was kept in its original condition, since he did not wish to miss anything which he was wont to see there; and he was so devoted to his grandmother's memory that on religious and festival days he always drank from a little silver cup that had belonged to her.²⁸ The example that comes closest is that of Ausonius. As a baby, he lived in the household of his maternal grandparents, who lived in close proximity to their son Aemilius Arborius (at that time a still unmarried promising scholar) and their daughter Aemilia Hilaria, who had chosen to remain celibate. Aemilia Corinthia Maura, Ausonius' maternal grandmother, took care of him as he was torn too soon from the cradle and his mother's breast: her training was kind but stern. We have a touching picture of her husband, grandfather Caecilius Argicius Arborius, who secretly kept a sealed horoscope of his grandchild, only to be discovered by the caring mother.²⁹ The case of Fronto who, as a loving grandfather took care of a four-year-old grandson in Rome while the boy's parents were in Germania Superior is well known, as well as his is sobering grief at the death of another grandson at age three -- a boy who was born in Germania and whom he had never get to know himself. Though Fronto's wife Cratia probably participated in the education

27 Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 6 pr. 8: *ut ille mihi blandissimus me suis nutricibus, me aviaie educanti, me omnibus qui sollicitare illas aetates solent anteferret.*

28 Suetonius, *Vespas.* 2, 1. See Krause (1994-1995) vol. 2, p. 199. I have paraphrased the translation by J. C. Rolfe.

29 Ausonius, *Par.* 5, 9-10 and *Par.* 4, 19-22. Agricola, grandson of Remigius, gives us a somewhat later case of a boy living in his grandparents' household, see *Testamentum Remigii* (MGH SRM 3, 336-347), before 533 CE. On these cases, see Laes, Vuolanto (2016).

of her little grandson in Rome, her role as a caring grandmother is not mentioned in Fronto's correspondence.³⁰

None of these examples explicitly mentions the word *nutrix*, and so the suspicion remains that something more could have been meant by using this specific term, especially since the combination *mater* and *nutrix* points to the breastfeeding by the mother herself. The theme of a grandmother offering her withered breasts for feeding is attested in medieval hagiography. It is often connected with situations of utter poverty and crisis: the mother died, and the grandmother had searched in vain for a wet-nurse. Sometimes, the theme of the *Virgo Lactans* is adduced to strengthen the miraculous character of the report. While at first sight, the phenomenon seems strange and utterly impossible from a medical point of view, anthropological research in both Africa and Oceania has attested very similar facts. Upto old age, women (quite often the grandmothers) continued offering breastfeeding. They either performed the tasks of wet-nurse over a extended period of time, or they returned to the task of offering milk by drinking portions of coconut milk and have their nipples stimulated by suckling infants.³¹ Moreover, in France upto the eighteenth century, women or even men performed the task of being a *tétairre*: by suckling the breasts of women, they kept them in good shape and condition to offer milk to babies whenever needed.³²

To the best of my knowledge, no similar situations for Roman Antiquity are known.³³ However, one inscription from the second

30 Fronto, *Ad amicos* 1, 12 (178, 11 - 179, 3 van den Hout); *De Nepote Amisso* 3 (237-238 van den Hout). See Laes (2005) 195-197 (Fronto's wife Cratia died about 165/166, some years before her husband) and Eyben, Laes (2005).

31 Morel (2002) 146-152.

32 Morel (2002) 160; Robb (2007) 116.

33 Dasen (2015) 250 accepts the possibility of breastfeeding ("une nourrice âgée ou une grande-mère encore en âge d'allaiter") for the inscription from Verona (supra note 7), without mentioning the present *AE* 2007, 298 inscription for Berus. Speculatively, I would also like to mention thirteenth-century Saint Raymond Nonnatus, patron of midwives, childbirth, children and pregnant women. His nickname Nonnatus is explained by the fact that he was born by Caesarean section: *Brev. Rom.* 31 aug.: *Nonnatus cognomento dictus, quia praeter communem naturae legem e mortuae matris dissecto latere in lucem eductus fuit*. However, given the fact that the Latin *nonna* is used as an equivalent for *nutrix* (Janssens (1981) 180) other interpretations might be possible. As the Italian *nonna* means grandmother, there

century CE which did not yet make it into the epigraphical corpora, might depict a situation which comes very close.³⁴ Agonius Ingenuus commemorates Agonia Ingenua, whom he calls both his mother and grandmother. It is well known that the Latin *mater* might also refer to the person who nurses the baby.³⁵ The inscription only mentions the father Agonius Sabinus and Agonia Sabina, who is explicitly referred to as the dry-nurse (*nutrix assa*), whose tasks did not include breastfeeding. No biological mother seems to be mentioned.³⁶ Unfortunately, the formulation of the inscription is most unclear and flawed from a grammatical point of view. We might as well interpret that Agonius Ingenuus dedicated to Agonia Ingenua (his sister?), to his unnamed mother and grandmother who would be buried at the same spot at the moment of their death, and to his *nutrix assa* Agonia Sabina (in which case *et Agonia Sabina nutrici assae* needs to be understood as a dative). Alternatively, Agonia Ingenua could have been Ingenuus' grandmother, while his mother is not mentioned by name. The place of the burial was donated by his father Agonius Sabinus, though it remains strange why he is not mentioned as a dedicator here (did he already die, and was he buried elsewhere?). Also the role of Atinius Lupulus remains unclear. Be this as it may be, this is the only inscription with a possible identification of *mater* and *avia*, and conclusions must be formulated in a very cautious way.³⁷

might be an indication of the involvement of his grandmother in early childhood education.

34 Ferrua (1961) 20: *Dis Manibus / Agoniae / Ingenuae fec(it) / Agonius Ingenu(us) / aviae suae et matri / bene merentibus et / suis omnibus locus datus / ab Agonio Sabino patre / et Agonia Sabina nutrici / assae et / A(ulus) Atinius Lupulus / in front(e) p(edes) XXX in agr(o) p(edes) X.*

35 See e.g. Plautus, Men. prol. 19: *Mater sua ... quae mammam dabat, neque adeo mater ipsa, quae illos pepererat* or Phaedrus, Fab. 3, 15.

36 Admittedly, doubts remain, because of the use of the dative plural *merentibus*. However, the grammar is flawed also in the rest of the inscription, as in the form *nutrici assae* (supposed to be an ablative ?) and the changing to the nominative Atinius Lupulus.

37 The commentary by Ferrua (1961) 21 is worth citing: "La grammatica e la sintassi sono un poco imbrogliate. La madre del dedicante Agonio Ingenuo menzionata nel v. 5 resta innominata, mentre il padre e menzionato nel v. 8. Tanto questi come l'Agonia Sabina erano stati allevati dalla defunta Ingenua, che aveva

4. Conclusions

The inevitably fragmentary character of a grave inscription for an *avia* who is also called *nutrix* leaves us with many questions we would like to answer but which remain ultimately unanswered. What we know for sure is that two grandchildren gratefully commemorated their grandmother who somehow had an Egyptian link. She was probably their paternal grandmother, though maternal lineage cannot be excluded. Whether the dedicators did so as adults honouring an elder woman, or as younger children cannot be ascertained beyond doubt, though the former seems more plausible. The fact that other family members are not mentioned may be indicative, but again many questions and scenarios are left open.

What stands out, however, is the almost unique and unparalleled character of the formulation *aviae et nutrici*. Whether it refers to custodial tasks in the early childhood years or to actual breastfeeding is again open to interpretation. But the inscription for Berus, which so far got almost unnoticed by social historians, adds to the history of being a grandmother in Roman Antiquity and to the study of growing up motherless in the ancient world. Both are books or chapters that still need to be written.³⁸

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fatta loro da balia secca, come se dice anche da noi. Qual figura faccia il Lupulo del v. 11, se dia ance lui il suolo o abbia diritto alla sepoltura, non si capisce." Ferrua does not even mention the unnamed *avia*: did he presume that she was identical to the *mater*? Obviously, *ICUR* 3, 7138d cannot be adduced as evidence, since it is too fragmentary[---]s in pacem/ [--a]viae et matri.

38 A conference on Growing Up Motherless in Antiquity will be organised in Basel, May 2016 and organised by Sabine Huebner and David Ratzan.

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