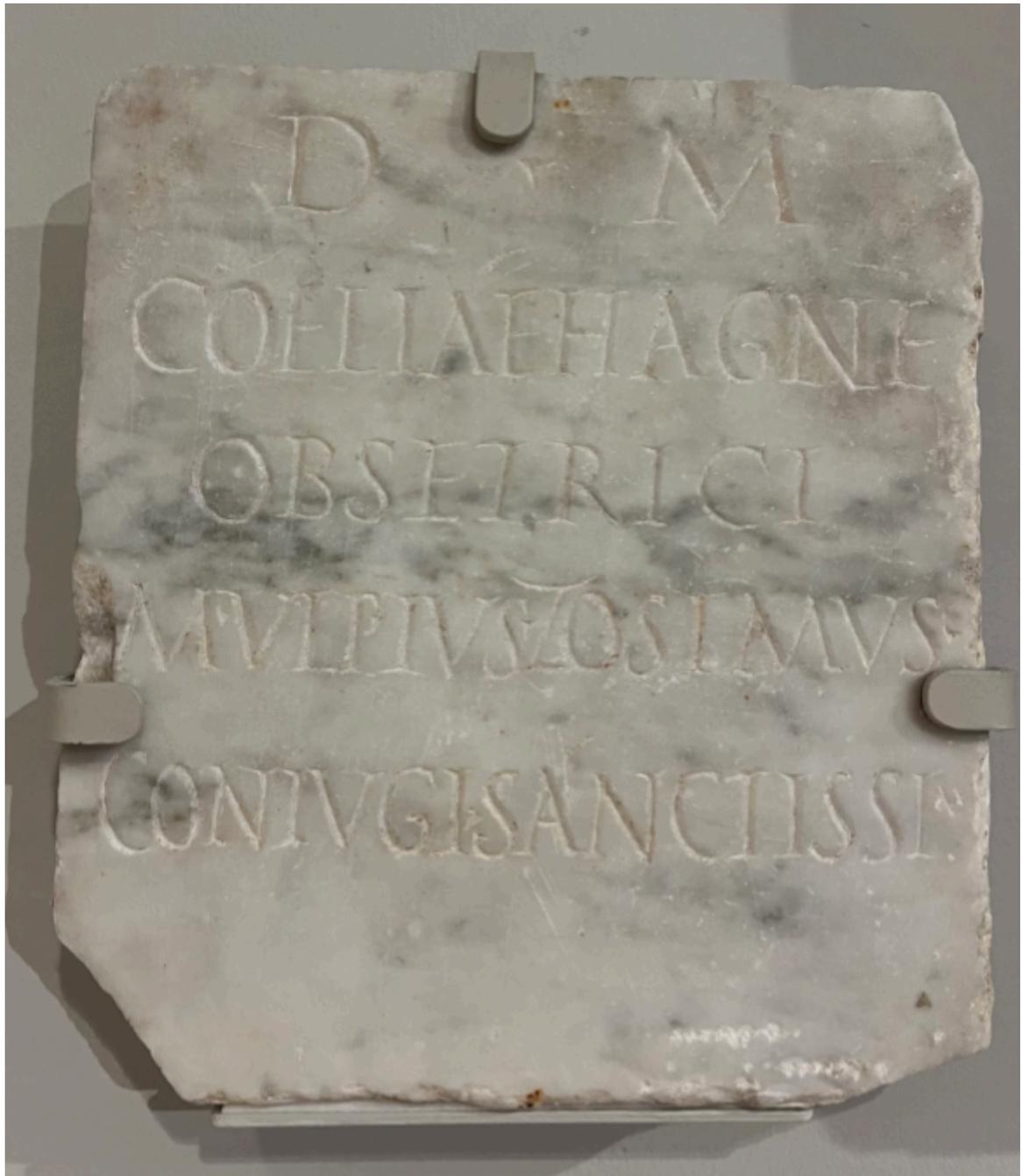


Ancient Midwives Between Binaries

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KM 869

In the University of Michigan's Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, there hangs an inscription from between first and second century AD Rome. It is dedicated to the writer's late wife, who he claims is a midwife. Translated, the inscription reads, "To the Shades of the Underworld: for Coelia Hagne, a midwife. Marcus Ulpius Zosimus (made this) for his most holy wife." Coelia was just one of a whole lineage of midwives who worked in ancient Greece and Rome. It was a profession passed from one woman to the next and about which much was written, perhaps most notably in Soranus' *Gynecology*, which not only provides instructions for midwives but details who the author thinks ought to take on this career. These instructions, as well as the other writing about midwives, paint a picture of them as both masculine and feminine, both respected and often of lower social status than the people they worked for. Coelia was also just one of many midwives whose profession was noted in her epigraph. Some of these epigraphs were written by family members, but many midwives also noted their own professions. This begs the question: why did Coelia's husband feel like this information was important enough to include in his wife's inscription? To be of note, it seems like midwifery must have held more importance than an average career. So what can the fact that midwives' professions were noted on their epigraphs tell us about the way in which this career shaped their identity in terms of social status and gender? By looking not just at Coelia's inscription but those of other midwives and the literature that has been written about them in antiquity and in the present, it appears that midwives' professions may have been especially notable because this was not just an important part of their lives but was deeply tied to their identities, specifically regarding their social status and the space they occupied between masculine and feminine.

A midwife's profession necessarily affected her identity by influencing how she fit into the social structure. In his essay "Midwives in Greek Inscriptions in Hellenistic and Roman

Antiquity,” Christian Laes notes that from the midwives’ inscriptions we have, it appears that “a strikingly high number” of them were freedwomen, (156) a fact that various other authors, including Rebecca Fleming and Valerie French, have written about as well. Laes gives the percentage as 42%, while another 29% were likely of slave status, making for a total over 70% who originated this way. While midwives may not have been at the top of the social hierarchy by default, Laes does note, in “The Educated Midwife in the Roman Empire,” that neither were they living in poverty. In her article “Midwives and Maternity Care in the Roman World,” French writes about how midwives were often well-paid, something enslaved women certainly couldn’t claim. In the third century, marriage pacts often included money to pay a midwife. Midwives were also more respected than enslaved people might have been. French explains that “since midwifery is an occupation that can be practiced successfully into old age, emancipation cannot be explained by the owner’s desire to shuffle off a useless slave. Thus, we can propose that midwives were generally valued enough, and earned enough income, to be able to gain their freedom.” She writes, too, of how midwifery may have been a way for an enslaved woman not only to be freed but to find a place in higher society, even if only by proximity: many wealthy families found their midwives in slaves who were highly educated and trained in the profession. While Laes explains that midwives, as well as doctors, were not always respected, some were, specifically those who included this distinction in their epigraphs. Laes writes that “at least some midwives who chose to advertise themselves in Greek inscriptions were respected members of society, sometimes sharing the appreciation medical professions met in the Greek epigraphical habit” (“Midwives in Greek Inscriptions in Hellenistic and Roman Antiquity” 158). So regardless of how midwifery changed the social status of all midwives, it almost undoubtedly influenced the identity, in this way, of those who noted it.

The descriptions of who would make an ideal midwife also show the additional status they may have obtained in this profession, which relates not only to respect but, relatedly, to masculinity. In his *Gynecology*, Soranus describes who is “fit” to be a midwife. Among his stipulations are several that would imply a certain level of education expected mostly of people higher in the social hierarchy. He says that midwives should be literate, ideally “well-versed in theory,” and “trained in all branches of therapy” (6). While these ideals are at face value more related to social status, they are also traits that were associated with men, rather than with women, at the time. This is evidenced partly by the fact that much of the writing for and about midwives was authored by men. Soranus makes this association of midwives with masculinity more explicit later. He claims that to be a midwife, a woman must be “robust” in order to support the laboring woman, who would likely be sitting on her during labor (5). This description, and the strength it implies, seems distinctly masculine. In order to gain the whole swath of education Soranus thinks midwives should have, he also thinks it necessary that she have “manly patience” (5). He warns against the stereotypical “deceitful” woman among midwives. Since midwives worked in people’s homes, these people needed to be able to trust the midwives to be “respectable” and able to keep their secrets (5). As a final way of distancing midwives from women, Soranus clarifies that it is not necessary for midwives to have borne children of their own (6). At a time when a woman’s role was largely seen as producing offspring, this clarification especially creates distance between midwives and what was considered feminine. Having children was something fundamental to being a woman, as they were perceived at the time, and Soranus claims that midwives do not need this fundamental characteristic. They are allowed to be more masculine. French’s note that midwifery could be “practiced successfully into old age,” unlike the task of giving birth, likewise allows this masculinity among midwives.

Midwives were also specifically associated with the masculine because of their relationship to male doctors. In her book *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority from Celsus to Galen*, Fleming analyzes Soranus' assertion that those who want to teach midwifery should have "the drive of a man," which she notes is from a passage in which Soranus states that aside from midwives, the ideal physician should be a man (274). In his descriptions, Soranus seems to be trying to reconcile midwives' identities as women with the identities of other doctors, who he saw as men, by masculinizing their profession. Laes notes the relationship between midwives and male doctors as well, saying that midwives often collaborated with a male *medicus* ("The Educated Midwife in the Roman Empire" 272). While Soranus' descriptions of midwives were likely more aspirational than they were reflections of who was actually allowed to be a midwife, they still show what may have been society's *and midwives'* perception of how they were supposed to present themselves and the space they were supposed to occupy in a gender binary. Fleming notes that Soranus' *Gynecology* "may be a book primarily directed at the production of heirs, but it is also one which recognizes that women have a choice in the matter: that being a non-reproductive, even non-menstruating, woman is a perfectly healthy, if somewhat anti-social, option" (369). This seemed to be an option specifically for women *in this profession*. To be a different type of woman — one who avoided the typical role of producing children — one had to enter into a profession that nevertheless made her respectable by performing a role more similar to that expected of a man. As Fleming writes, "On her own, the medical woman easily lapses into incoherence. She is an incomplete set of pieces which only really add up to something when taken as amending the standard, male, model of humanity" (362).

Midwives' relationship to masculinity, and therefore respectability, is also present in their position as barer, rather than subject, of medical knowledge. While midwives themselves seem to rarely have written prevalent texts on midwifery or medicine, their profession did bring them closer to it. Galen, in his writing about anatomy and women's illnesses, consulted many midwives and seemed to greatly respect their ideas on the subject. This seems likely related to their occupation of a space closer to the masculine than that of most women. Fleming notes that in antiquity especially, medical knowledge about women was occasionally provided by women, but that in general, "woman is simply an object of medical knowledge; she is the product of that knowledge, not a full participant in its formation" (361). In this context, it seems like the women who Galen consulted were in a position of men, in which they were examining and discussing the illnesses which affected women from a somewhat outside perspective, though surely with some additional knowledge as women themselves. This viewing of women through a masculine lens and participating on the side of men is brought full circle, as French notes, because the reason midwives had to be literate was largely so that they could read medical instructions, which were almost entirely written by men. To be validated by men practicing medicine seemed to be the highest praise for women in related professions. French describes how if women worked their way up from midwives to obstetricians, they might be able to write and publish writing that would be "read and cited by male physicians." Part of the respect that midwives earned, then, was brought on by their existence in a sphere of knowledge and practice dominated by men. In Coelia's inscription, it seems possible that her husband noted her occupation not only because of the respect it earned her, and the shifted identity it gave her, but because that respect and identity was one specifically appreciable by men, which, as a man, he felt was worth writing.

On the other hand, midwives did not, and were not probably meant to, take on an entirely masculine role or identity. Soranus notes some traits of midwives that seem distinctly feminine, like soft hands and “long, slim fingers” (5). While the profession was written about by men and they were the ones who largely defined what it *should* look like, it was still a women’s profession. Midwives learned from writing by men, but Laes also describes how midwifery knowledge was passed down from one woman to the next (“Midwives in Greek Inscriptions in Hellenistic and Roman Antiquity” 154). Midwifery itself was, in a way, a method of keeping men from examining women’s bodies (Laes, “The Educated Midwife in the Roman Empire” 267). Women likely trusted and preferred another woman to help them when giving birth than they would a man. Midwifery’s inherent femininity is further proven by the disrespect it has since been shown in a medical system built on patriarchy. In her essay “Midwifery, Then and Now,” Tara Mulder explains how midwifery was outlawed in the early modern and modern periods because “male medical doctors took over the practice of delivering babies.” Mulder says that home births and practices associated with midwifery are often seen as less safe than hospital births, but that we should question this. This stigma, she writes, is likely borne from the fact that “sometimes the ‘great’ advances in modern medicine...are rooted not in data, but in patriarchy.” In the 19th century, pediatry came into existence, hospital birthing became the norm, and in 1902 and 1936, the English *Midwives Acts* incorporated midwifery “into the official and state-controlled medical assistance” (Laes, “The Educated Midwife in the Roman Empire” 266). Just as midwives were associated with masculinity in some ways in the ancient world, the practice has since been somewhat absorbed into a patriarchal system, where it is nevertheless disrespected because of its feminine associations.

The ways in which midwifery influenced women's identities in ancient Greece and Rome was complicated and at times contradictory, but it almost certainly affected their identities beyond what a typical occupation could have because of the effect it had on where these women fit into both social hierarchies and a gender binary. Being a midwife could mean being freed and seen as a human with her own agency rather than being enslaved, viewed as property. It could mean earning both money and respect. It could mean an escape from the childbearing role typically expected of women, which was what typically gave them value. Because of this, although it was a profession of women and therefore inherently feminine, practicing midwifery associated women with men in certain ways. Because of the men who dominated medical professions and related literature at the time, it also gave midwives an ideal that was even more masculine than the reality may have been. This occupation created a specific identity for women, one with a balance of masculine and feminine, of respect and service, and with a particular aspiration. When considering the fact that midwives' epigraphs, like that of Coelia, mentioned their profession, the reason seems to lie in the fact that this occupation was not just what they did, but who they were.

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