

# HONOURABLE SLAVES?

The socioeconomic aspects of enslaved wet-nurses in Classical Athens

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**ABSTRACT:** In the huge collection of ancient Greek grave steles we find a number of inscriptions dedicated to wet nurses of the rich, elite citizenry of Classical Athens. This is a quite peculiar and noteworthy appearance, both keeping in mind that these wet nurses are enslaved people, and therefore ‘socially dead’, as well as being females in ancient Athens – a situation without any form of political, legal or social rights. This article sets out to explore why these honours came to be, and what they essentially means for the wet nurses in question, in terms of social status and socioeconomic opportunities. Throughout, it will be argued that these nurses display a dichotomous position in the ancient Greek household, due to their privileged and problematic knowledge of the most intimate aspects of the citizen’s private life.

**KEYWORDS:** wet nurse, ancient Greece, Classical Athens, Greek slaves, enslaved females.



## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In recent years the subjects of ancient Greek slavery have been greatly revised. Much scholarly attention has recently been on what defines this group, as well as their social status and how to interpret different examples of ‘slaves’ socio-economic opportunities (e.g. Lewis 2018; Vlassopoulos 2023; Cartledge 2024). Moreover, scholars argue for a more nuanced and in-depth study of the social implications and socio-economic contexts of slaves (*ibid.*; Finley 1980; Patterson 1982). In this article, I aim towards conducting a study of the socio-economic implications of slaves.

The ancient *poleis* (city-states) of the Eastern Mediterranean were furthermore subject of high mobility, namely among the enslaved, who were migrants or descendants of migrants being owned by high and middle-class citizens. As non-citizens and outsiders, enslaved individuals would find it challenging to improve their living conditions or to rise within the social hierarchy (Vadan 2022). As scholars of ancient mobility has shown, the Greek *poleis* were characterised by exclusion of resident aliens from political and legal spheres, and newcomers to the society of the *polis* were thus stripped of all networks and social relations to help bettering their well-being (*ibid.*; Demetriou 2012; Møller 2023). Did these enslaved aliens have no conditions or possibilities for establishing social relations, then?

Obviously, the answer to such question cannot give a definitive account of enslaved people as a whole, since they are not a homogenous group. I will therefore examine a specific case in which I see possibilities of enslaved people bettering their conditions via social relations. The case in question is focussed on the household slaves (*oiketes*)<sup>2</sup>, specifically the wet-nurses, since they have close contact with wealthy citizens on a day-to-day basis. As will be clear from the following, this creates a curious context for the nurse, which both achieves venerable (one might even term it honourable) praise as well as stigmatisation. This article therefore seeks to study this paradoxical construction of the slave as both honourable and stigmatised. Under which historical contexts and cultural prerequisites does this manifest, and what constitutes the differences in portrayals?

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<sup>1</sup> I thank my academic advisor Emil Skaarup, who not only supervised the BA-thesis that preceded this article, but who also provided valuable advice on rewriting it. All remaining errors are mine.

<sup>2</sup> From Greek οἱ οἰεῖτες, meaning ‘household-slave’, from οἶκος meaning household.

## Historiographical remarks

As mentioned above, there exist different schools of thought concerning ancient Greek slavery. Throughout this article, I follow D. Lewis and K. Vlassopoulos in their understanding of slavery as defined by legal ownership and in terms of their local contexts (Lewis 2018; Vlassopoulos 2023; cf. Patterson 1982). Lewis and Vlassopoulos argue, albeit through different means, that ancient slavery should be viewed according to their own, local historical and social contexts (*ibid.*). As such, the circumstances we might find concerning slaves should not be seen in comparison to other *poleis*, but in accordance with internal, small-scale contexts. This is highly important for my approach to the sources of the wet-nurses, since their circumstances of dichotomous portrayal should be viewed *vis-à-vis* their social relations within the household.

The subject of nurses' well-being, status and relations is not an unexplored phenomenon. G. Pedrucci (2020) gives an overview of the wet nurse both in Greek and Roman contexts, by analysing the nurses' functions and social conditions. She, too, examines this dichotomous and paradoxical portrayal of the wet-nurse, as well as the prostitutes. Although exclusively through Roman Imperial evidence, she concludes that relations between the aristocratic citizen and their wet-nurse were highly ambivalent and differing (*ibid.*, 138). While her views are intriguing, several problems occur: first of all, due to the paucity of evidence in the Greek context, her study focuses mainly on the Roman side, while assuming Roman sources quantifiably account of the Greek nurses. Secondly, there is a general lack of citation which makes it challenging to confirm her arguments; her only Greek primary source cited is a Demosthenes speech, all else is secondary literature. Lastly, while I find her comparisons between nurses and prostitutes possibly believable, she fails to acknowledge the anachronistic nature of her perception of ancient Greek prostitutes' status as well as nurses'.

On matters of inclusion and exclusion of resident aliens in the social and political spheres, we have scholars like D. Demetriou and M. Møller, in their respective works *Negotiating Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean* and *Balancing Integration*. Both conclude (with different outset, source material and population group) that resident aliens experienced different degrees of inclusion in social and political spheres, and that the determining of this often relied on their personal ties with citizens (Møller 2023; Demetriou 2012; 2023; cf. Vadan 2022: 386-92). This argument will be vital for the coming analysis; their focus, however, is exclusively on the resident aliens who are known as *metoikoi*, while not taking into account the aliens who were enslaved. Part of the social standing of the slave

is due to their integration into the household. Therefore, Denetriou and Møller are of much importance to quantify whether these different experiences of integration also apply to enslaved, alienated people.

An important scholar in the well-being and social ties of poor, labouring inhabitants of Classical Athens is C. Taylor, who in her monography *Poverty, Wealth, and Well-Being* asserts (among many other things) that nurses could establish a special relationship with the people whom they worked for. This is possible due to a relationship of mutual need – which complements scholar's arguments that enslaved people fulfilled a specific need for the citizens (Finley 1980). Elsewhere, Taylor argues that social networks highly affect the possibilities of (especially) alienated, as well as their quality of life. Although seminal, Taylor's analysis deals with impoverished Athenian inhabitants in general, while not exclusively focusing on slaves or nurses. In fact, nurses play a relatively small role in her study and are only dealt with sporadically and with a clear focus in mind. Her conclusions and arguments will thus be central to the coming analysis, while also complementing the relatively small role she grants nurses in her research.

## Definition and structure

One thing scholars generally agree on is that the nurses of Classical Athens are far from a homogenous group. This is supported by the sources attributing different levels of status and disagreeing on which duties they should have. It is clear, however, that the wet-nurse had more responsibility than just breastfeeding and caring for the new-born children. They often functioned also as caregivers throughout childhood, far into adulthood (and sometimes the nurse's dotage). This explains the disharmony with *tittbes* and *trophos*<sup>3</sup> (which often are roughly translated to wet nurses and governess, respectively) sometimes being used synonymously in Greek sources. There seems to be no discernible difference between the two, although some patterns of distinction could be argued for (Rühfel 1988: 43; Kosmopolou 2001: 285).<sup>4</sup> My assumption is that the roles of the servants of *oikos* were more ambiguous. Nurses should be viewed as both governesses and/or nursemaids, since there is no clear-cut distinction, and the roles are on both sides interchangeable.

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<sup>3</sup> Greek: *τίτθης* and *τροφός*.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Kosmopolou argues that *tittbes* is primarily used by actual breastfeeding nurses, probably when the child is infant, and could thereafter become (more as a social construct than an actual title) *trophos*, governess (i.e. also the child's guardian as it grows older). The evidence is, however, too scarce to make any definitive conclusion or generalisation (Kosmopolou 2001: 285).

The sources for these nurses are sparse, and those few available are highly biased in origins. The theatres are although of a more complex character, since they (ideally) mirror perceptions of social groups, as seen by the population as a whole. Specifically, the comedies by Menander are a unique source depicting everyday life within the household - but should still be dealt with close attention to elite bias. The primary sources material in question are epigraphy and juridical orations. Although they display bias as well, they give a unique insight in the nurses' place in the *oikos*. The epigraphical material in question, consisting of epitaphs for nurses, are signs of 'occasions for public recognition' of the deceased's (supposed) virtues (Skaarup 2023: 43). These types of source material are embedded in elitist viewpoints, but since this paper focuses on the relations between citizens and their slaves, such bias comes to our advantage by displaying the elite's depictions of (and therefore sensation of social tie to) their slaves. The viewpoint of the enslaved, however, can hardly be qualitatively asserted.

Bearing all this in mind, the present paper does not aim at an examination of all nurses' possibilities, well-beings and social statuses, but rather displays cases in which some could accomplish such social improvements. Being a heterogeneous group, those cases could hardly be argued as representative of all nurses, and the conclusion should therefore be viewed as such. Firstly, I will examine cases in which nurses are depicted as honourable, trustworthy characters of the *oikos*, primarily by looking at epigraphical and juridical sources. Secondly, I will present counterarguments, examining cases in which nurses are hardly being shown as honourable characters. Here I will focus on theatrical plays as well as archaeological remains, since they plausibly display the discourses and perceptions of the elites of Athens. Lastly, I will discuss this dichotomous quality, in order to examine what factors constitute this difference of perception and recognition.

### Honouring the household wet nurse

In Euripides' tragedy *Medea*, we meet the protagonist's nurse (a *trophos*), who develops into a devoted trustee of her owner. Throughout the play she appears as Medea's trustee—at least trying to advise her against her brutal acts—and periodically acts as storyteller to the audience (Eur., *Med.*: 184-204; 1-45). Furthermore, she becomes Medea's companion through her quest for revenge over Jason. Bearing in mind a nurse ought to be of lower standing, why is she devoted such importance in a play? Is this a notion that plays display a poor sense of reality, or rather that nurses are a more complicated and ambiguous matter?

Similarly, in Euripides' *Hippolytus* we meet a nurse of Queen Phaidra who is vital to the plot of the

play. After Aphrodite makes Phaidra fall in love with her stepson Hippolytus, the queen becomes distraughtly afraid of diminishing the reputation of her husband (Hippolytus' father). She confides her distraught to her nurse, who takes the matter in her own hands to persuade Hippolytus to give in to Phaidra's lust. After this proves unsuccessful, Phaidra –in realising Hippolytus gained awareness of her desire– hangs herself to the great regret and demise of her nurse and Hippolytus; thus the tragedy of the play (Eur., *Hipp.*: 170-265, 309-61, 602-700). This displays the privileged and intimate knowledge that the nurses might have possessed about their citizen families. Therefore, the nurses must, in some aspects, have been part of the innermost, private spheres of the citizen family and also been somehow entrusted this intimate information. As argued below, this is possible because the citizens are dependent upon their nurses' care and work. The role of the nurses in Euripides' plays displays the discourses and perceptions of the relations between the rich elite and their nurses, as seen through the elites themselves. It is highly plausible that Euripides mirrored the audience's life or social norms through the relations of Phaidra and Medea with their own nurses, so that the viewers could relate to the characters in the plays. Still, it is a dubious and one-sided source for the social status of the nurse and her relationship with the people in her *oikos*. Therefore, we shall turn towards the epigraphical and juridical material.

The epigraphical sources in question here are a number of grave steles found, erected and dedicated to the *oikos*' nurse. This is interesting – bearing in mind that such dedications are special occasions for recognition of virtues. Unlike other ancient sources such as theatrical or philosophical, epigraphical steles often present people of different statuses and classes. One such inscription reads (IG II<sup>2</sup> 7873, trans. R. Pitt):<sup>5</sup>

Here the earth covers over the worthy nurse of Hippostrate; and now she longs for you. As long as you were alive, I loved you, nurse, and now I still honour you, though you are below the earth, and I will honour you as long as I live. I know that even below the earth, if there is in fact a reward for the worthy ones, the first and foremost honours, nurse, are yours, next to Persephone and Pluto.

This nurse is therefore honoured not only by the erection of a grave stele (an honour only few slaves met) but also by her virtue of being “worthy” (*chrēstē*) and with honour (*timē*). Hippostrate, who we presume paid for the stele, is undoubtedly displaying the nurse as an honoured and respected member of her *oikos*, especially given the comparison to Pluto and Persephone with wishes of

<sup>5</sup> From Greek: ἔνθα δὲ τῇν χρηστῇν τί τῇν κατὰ γαῖα καλύπτει | ἡ προστάτης καὶ νῦν ποθεῖ σε. | καὶ ζῶσαν σ' ἐφίλουν, τί τῇ, καὶ νῦν σ' ἔτι τιμῶ | οὖσαν καὶ κατὰ γῆς καὶ τιμήσω σε ἄχρ' ἂν ζῷ | οἱ δα δὲ σοὶ ὅτι καὶ κατὰ γῆς, εἴ περ χρηστοῖς γέρας ἐστί ν, | πρῶται σοὶ τιμαί, τί τῇ, παρὰ Φερσεφόνι Πλούτωνι τε κεῖνται.

reward in the afterlife. The inscription displays both honouring and almost loving devotion to the former nurse, which is likely due to the fact that this was the nurse of Hippostrate, when she was a child. Such inscriptions always mention the direct receivers of her care (see below), and since Hippostrate is presumably adult when erecting this stele, we can assume that she indeed was the ‘child’ of the nurse’s care.

There is, however, a clear interest in erecting such stone for one’s nurse, besides mere devotion and honouring. By erecting such grave stele, Hippostrate shows the public that she indeed can afford stone inscriptions, even for her slaves. It should therefore also be viewed as a display of own wealth, as much as a devotion to her slave. Contrarily, it is unlikely that citizens like Hippostrate would honour their nurses, if they were not in some way respected within *oikos*, or rather Hippostrate would not honour her nurse if she found her dishonourable. Nor does it disprove it being a public recognition of an enslaved woman.

Numerous other grave monuments display the same types of honouring (SEG 21:1064; IG II<sup>2</sup> 12559, 11647, 12387; Kosmopoulou 2001, N9), though one in particular exemplifies a specific point (IG II<sup>2</sup> 9112 = Kosmopoulou 2001: N4):<sup>6</sup>

Here the earth holds the nurse of the children of Diogeiton from the Peloponnese. This just woman,  
Malicha from Kythera.

This Malicha, who - as we are informed - was a resident alien from Kythera, is referenced only through the children of the (presumed) benefactor of the honouring. This portrayal of the nurses through the children whom they provide care for are numerous in epigraphic evidences and constitutive of how and why these slaves were honoured (Taylor 2017: 139). Similarly, in the theatrics of e.g. Euripides, they are portrayed as emotionally connected to the children (cf. e.g. Men. *Sam.*: 235-48; Eur. *Hipp.* 170-265; Taylor 2017: 135-40). Therefore, we see a clear relation between the caregiving slave and the children in their care.

Various other steles of more simple inscriptions plainly state “nurse” or “[our] just nurse” (IG II<sup>2</sup> 12813 (Kosmopoulou 2001: N5); Kosmopoulou 2001: N9; IG II<sup>2</sup> 13065). One reason for this could be that they were erected on the family or *oikos* grave, and therefore they did not need clarification as to who should get credit of erecting it. Another reason is that these short descriptions often supplemented a relief of the nurse, either depicting her sitting or in some sort of action with the

<sup>6</sup> From Greek: [ἔ]νθα δ[ε] γῆ κατέχει τί τὴν παῖ δὼν Διογεί το | ἔκ Πελοποννήσου τῇ νδε δικαιοτάτην. | Μαλίχα  
Κυθηρία.

members of her *oikos*. Hence, this should not be asserted as an alienation of the nurse but rather proves further the strong relation between her and the people in *oikos*.

Such relation between the nurse and the citizen in their care can be seen manifested in the juridical sources as well. In a pseudo-Demosthenes' speech, an unknown prosecutor defends his own dignity and grandeur by this colourful tale of his former nurse ([Dem.] 47.55, trans. A. T. Murray):

More than this, men of the jury, my wife happened to be lunching with the children in the court and with her was an elderly woman who had been my [wet-]nurse, a devoted soul and a faithful, who had been set free by my father. After she had been given her freedom she lived with her husband, but after his death, when she herself was an old woman and there was nobody to care for her, she came back to me. I could not suffer my old nurse, or the slave who attended me as a boy, to live in want; at the same time, I was about to sail as trierarch, and it was my wife's wish that I should leave such a person to live in the house with her.

Here, the relation has proved an advantage for the nurse, since she is taken back by her former family and owners - now into their care. We are also informed that she has been freed, on account of her devotedness and faithfulness, whereafter she lived a better life than the norm of most slaves. Obviously, the prosecutor has interest in creating a perception of him as a virtuous and morally good character, by exemplifying how good he took care of his nurse who took care of him. It is, yet, a public display of affection towards a nurse. The speaker would not publicly express his devotion to his nurse as such, unless it was virtuous in some form. Therefore, the passage should be seen as a result of strong ties between the nurse and the citizen in her care, as well as how this might result in an advantage to the nurse herself.

Drawing upon the previous points, we see a clear way these nurses are being honoured by virtue of their care towards the children and citizens of the *polis*. The nurses were, however, far from consistently portrayed as virtuous and honourable figures of the *oikos*; on the contrary, they were often depicted in a very different light. The following section provides an examination of this contesting view, in order to explore what can be learned from this dichotomous portrayal.



## The dishonourable, old house-nurse

In the comedies of Menander, the nurse is a recurring character with differing influence to the plot. Many of these plays feature the nurse as an old woman within the household (Men. *Sam.* 236-7); this is mirrored in a number of terracotta figurines (e.g. fig. 1), where the nurse is depicted as an old maid either breastfeeding or carrying children. She appears as a worn out lady, crooked and peculiar. We do not know how contemporaries perceived this, but in most cases reliefs on graves and statues depicted women as youthful and more neutral. This displays a curious difference in depictions of the wet nurse: as we have seen above, the nurse were clearly being depicted as honourable characters of the *oikos*; but was this necessarily the case with all nurses?

Firstly, we need to assert why these nurses were depicted as old maids. It would be naturally impossible for a wet nurse to breastfeed in old age, especially since it is only possible by having just given birth. What these figurines thus represent is not necessarily breastfeeding nurses (although they at one point could have been) but rather a nurse with the role and status of a nursemaid or governess. As mentioned above, this is supported by nurses being continuously attached to their 'child' even far into adulthood (as with the nurse of Queen Phaidra). However, this does not explain the stigmatised display of the nurse, which undeniably can be seen on the figurines.



Figure 1: Wet nurse terracotta figurine holding a child. The nurse is clearly being displayed as an old maid. © The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Furthermore, the nurses' role in comedies and tragedies is often problematic. If we examine again the Euripides' tragedy *Hippolytos*, the nurse of Phaidra is the one to make matters worse. Similarly, in Menander's comedy *Samia*, the protagonist, Demeas, overhears the nurse talking to herself stating that the child whom she nurses is that of Moschion and Chrysis. This proves to Demeas that Moschion had an affair with Chrysis, who is the mistress of Demeas (Men. *Sam.* 236-270). Once again, the nurse is being displayed as a character who complicates matters further, due to her privileged and problematic knowledge of the most intimate aspects of a citizen's life. It is exactly this intimate knowledge what creates a dichotomous role of the nurse. The nurse becomes a

confidant for the citizen but, due to this social relationship, she is also granted access to the citizen's most intimate and personal sphere; hence, she is also a problematic character in the household, because of this intimate connection with the citizen.

Another explanation of the nurses' dichotomous portrayals can be discerned from their heterogeneous character as a distinct group. As earlier mentioned, wet nurses were described as both *titthes* and *trophos*, which could both refer to actual wet nurses, governesses, nursemaids or pedagogues. They could also be women of different ages, and would sometimes be in service of a household from their early adulthood until old age (Pedrucci 2020; Taylor 2017: 226-33). It is suspected that the vast and heterogeneous group that is wet nurses would experience different varieties of depictions, then.

This also illuminates a much bigger discussion: if wet nurses are depicted in various ways due to their internal differences, then their experiences of slave-citizen relationships must also have varied accordingly. Even though we have seen examples of wet nurses being honoured, it is important to remember that the source material is highly fragmented, and that we are only left with the sources which the richer, privileged citizens have left for us. Thus, we are left with half a picture, and what these figurines and less flattering depictions might show is exactly this missing (textual) representation.

Thus, to sum up, we must contend that different nurses experienced different levels of honouring as well as being associated with different social statuses. Some nurses might have experienced great levels of honouring (e.g. in death, by flattering gravestones), whereas some might have been –as the figurines might be a representation of– just hardworking slaves until old age. It is of course expected that different slaveowners treated their slaves differently. However, this does not mean that care plays no role in this difference; as will be clear by the following, the caring of citizens becomes vital to whether the nurse is depicted honourably or otherwise.

### Caring begets caring

If these wet nurses are to be believed as internally different, what distinguishes them from each other? In other words, what makes the elite slave owners honour some wet nurses, and some not? To answer such questions, we would need statements from the elite owners on their nurses' virtuousness, which –incidentally– is possible via their implicit voice in the elite-made sources. Here the bias of ancient sources is to our advantage. If we take a closer look at the pseudo-Demosthenes' oration mentioned above, we may notice how the nurse has been emancipated on account of being

“a devoted soul and a faithful” (Dem. 47.55, trans. A. T. Murray). It is, therefore, the nurse’s faithfulness and devotion to the *oikos* that are highlighted. Furthermore, the speaker emphasises: “I could not suffer my old nurse, or the slave who attended me as a boy, to live in want”, which obviously refer to the care she provided for him during his childhood and supposedly early adulthood as well (*ibid.*). Hence, her devotion must refer to her caring for the citizen children in the household.

If we look carefully at these grave inscriptions, we notice the word *chrēsten*<sup>7</sup> describing virtually every wet nurse and which roughly translates to good, useful or serviceable (SEG 21.325; IG II<sup>2</sup> 12559; 11647; 7873; Kosmopoulou 2001: N9; IG II<sup>2</sup> 12387; 12815). Those are to be interpreted as virtuous qualities for a nurse, since they are connected to her services towards the citizens in her care. The central aspect is the nurse’s function as a caregiver and her ability to look after the children properly. Therefore, being a good nurse, worthy of honourable dedications, means to be a useful and serviceable nurse - i.e. providing good care for children. It might seem obvious that a nurse’s good ability comes from her nursing, but what is central is how this evolves into an honouring of her; the nurse’s caring for the children alone enables this honouring.

To understand why this becomes so essential, it is important to look at the relation this care creates between the nurse and ‘her children’. Scholars argue children would often be more connected to the nurse than their actual mothers, due to the nurse’s *de facto* motherly role (Pedrucci 2020; Kosmopoulos 2001; Emery 2010). Therefore, we see a unique and close relation between enslaved and citizen. We noted this with the nurses in Euripides’ *Hippolytos* and *Medea* already, as the characters, even though they are adults, are still very closely connected to their nurses. Then, being a nurse meant, among other things, having a close connection to their children, which could mean a lifelong relation to them.

Taylor argues that the closeness between nurse and citizen is due to an interdependent relationship between the two: both in terms of the nurses being dependent on the ‘work’ the owners and their children provide, as well as the citizens being dependent on the nurse’s services to endure. The children are dependent on nursing, caring, etc., while the adult citizens are dependent on the nurse to provide these services, allowing them to maintain their political, social, and labor obligations (Taylor 2017: 140). Generally, Taylor asserts that female enslaved, despite their slave-status, were able to form social relationships both within and outside the household (*ibid.*: 230). The close bond

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<sup>7</sup> Greek: χρῆσθην.

that is formed due to the motherly role of the nurse, therefore, results in an interdependent relationship, where the nurse's possibilities for being honoured are greatly expanded.

What the connection between individuals means for the status of the nurses highly depends on the individual nurse who is in question. If we are to believe that the nurses could form social ties with the citizens of their *oikos*, we are at the same time opposing any notion that slaves were 'socially dead' people - in the sense of having no social ties whatsoever. What this study has shown, however, is that female slaves in their function as wet nurses were capable of some form of socioeconomic mobility, which ultimately denies any notion of being 'socially dead' (Patterson 1982). But it does not necessarily apply to all nurses, and especially not all slaves. Are we then to believe nurses to be completely different from what we understand as ancient slaves? As Lewis has shrewdly observed, if we look beyond just classical Athens, there are numerous examples of enslaved having social possibilities. In Sparta, for example, the enslaved *belots* are known to birth children; in the city-state of Gortyn on Crete the *woikeis* (possibly household slaves) are known to marry both other enslaved as well as non-slaves (although not citizens: cf. Lewis 2018: 1-22; 125-46; 147-66; Lewis 2013; cf. Vlassopoulos 2023). These differences are partly made possible by local circumstances, which sometimes necessitated alternative approaches or proved advantageous to slaveowners. Such is the case of the nurses: the circumstances surrounding the nurse's functions enables this close personal relation by the continuous care (physical and personal). A social relation must also have been advantageous to the owners, both in terms of the 'motherly role' of the nurse and, practically speaking, in terms of them being a part of the household for life (unless emancipated).

However, at the same time there is a curious distinction between being portrayed as honourable and stigmatised. What constitutes this difference? It is exactly the caring, that makes the wet-nurse both honourable and stigmatised. Clearly, the citizens are dependent on the nurse for the tasks and work they cannot or do not want to do: the nurses are providing the 'dirty' work, of child caring, breastfeeding, raising the children, etc. This work, which is incidentally the lowest type of work for a citizen, makes the nurse a highly nuanced character in the *oikos*. The citizens are both obliged to her services as well as appalled by her type of work. This ultimately creates a paradoxical and dichotomous perception of the nurses as both needful and socially different to the citizens.

The case of the wet nurse exemplifies how the differences in the opportunities and socioeconomic conditions of enslaved individuals are not solely determined by geographical or local factors (as might be argued in the cases of Sparta and Gortyn), but they also vary depending on the enslaved person's capacity for social relations. Arguing that slaves generally were more heterogeneous or

against any notion of ‘social death’ is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, the aim of the present paper has been to open up the discussion of the nurse’s place within the spectrum of status (Canevaro 2018: 22-3; Vlassopoulos 2023), as well as to opt for a more nuanced look at different types of slaves’ opportunities for social mobility, despite their enslaved constraints.

## Conclusion

The nurses of ancient Greek households were clearly a heterogeneous group. In this study, I have examined the different depictions and cases involving caregivers within the household and can thus conclude that they were ambiguous in character. Some sources, like the epigraphic ones and to some extent the theatrical and oratorical, give the impression that nurses were honoured and respected within the citizens’ households, forming strong social relations with the citizens in their care. However, the nurse is also being depicted as an old, worn-down maid and a problematic character. I have argued that this ambiguity and difference is rooted in an understanding of the ‘good nurse’ as defined by her caring for the citizens of the *oikos*. Thus, this caring constitutes a social relationship with the citizen, which in turn laments her position as a respected character in the household; at the same time, caregiving becomes the reason why nurses are being honoured on gravestones, emancipated, or taken back in the care of the household at old age. At the same time, the care becomes a stigmatiser, in that the nurses provide works the citizens do not want to do themselves. The caring work, then, constitutes a paradox: while citizens depend on these services, the work-position itself is highly stigmatised and low-class.

Furthermore, this certainly quantifies the debate on the social relations of slaves in ancient Greece: these nurses can hardly be said to be ‘socially dead’, and we must therefore understand that different slaves, nurses etc. had different preconditions and possibilities for socioeconomic mobility. Thus, like Møller and Demetriou has shown with alienated in the *polis* (Møller 2023; Demetriou 2012), different slaves experienced different levels of integration within the *oikos*.



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