

The Milky Way
Motherhood and Childhood from Antiquity to the Bellucci Collection

ENGLISH VERSION
BY
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THE EXHIBITION

This temporary exhibition, made possible by the of the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Perugia (Bando Eventi Culturali 2022), aims to focus our attention on a topic still very relevant, and to illustrate themes, such as motherhood and early childhood, both in the ancient world and through the amulets from the Bellucci Collection, through an anthropological, iconographical/iconological, and historical lens, with particular care for the history of the museum and for the protection of women and children, as well as for the nuances of tradition and popular beliefs.

In the Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell'Umbria, we find *ex voto* with uteri and breasts, breastfeeding women, swaddled babies and infants in their early years of life, both made of clay and of bronze, and recently we have systematically restored of Etrusco-Roman votives from the Grotta Lattaia, on Monte Cetona, a natural cave, already documented in 1798 by Pienza naturalist Giorgio Sant and excavated by Umberto Calzoni between 1939 and 1940, which owes its name to the popular belief that the water dripping from the stalactites had breastmilk-inducing properties, a belief still documented in the 20th century.

A gem of the Museo is the BELLUCCI COLLECTION, incredibly rich and organic collection of amulets, healing objects and magical-religious tools, made and used mostly in southern and central Italy, between the end of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th, an exceptional learning tool to introduce newer generations to the knowledge of popular beliefs and folklore.

Fig. 1: Giuseppe Bellucci

Giuseppe Bellucci (Perugia, 25th of April 1844 - 3rd of January 1921, fig. 1), naturalist and anthropologist, many times headmaster of the Università di Perugia, professor of organic and inorganic chemistry, head of the Department of Medicine and Pharmacology, palaeo-ethnologist and researcher of folklore, is a protagonist of the sweeping development of natural and human sciences in the great age of Positivism.

Within his multifaceted and hectic research activity, he dedicated particular and passionate attention to the amulets "question", producing an impressive amount of work, from research on the field to collecting and cataloguing materials, to sorting and interpreting them. After his death, his collection went to the Musei Civici del Comune di Perugia and afterwards to the State, once the Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell'Umbria (MANU) was created. In the collection, permanently displayed in the museum (display curated by G. Baronti, with the collaboration between the then Soprintendenza Archeologica dell'Umbria and the Università di Perugia), we find amulets against natural disasters like lightning bolts and hailstorms; magical and healing objects, as well as sections dedicated to religious syncretism and the relationship between ancient and modern amulets. Great

attention is given to crucial moment and rites of passage in human life (engagement, marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, early childhood) that in all ages, changes, and religious beliefs have pushed mankind to try and exorcise the fear of death, pain, illness, through the search for specific protective, ritual, magical, and healing practices which would ensure good health, serenity, prosperity, well-being, and good luck for the individual and their successors.

This Exhibition proposes associations between contemporary amulets and archaeological materials, ideally reconnecting the two most significant and characteristic souls of the Museo that, since its creation, has not only been the Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell'Umbria, but a magnificent container (given its location in the monumental complex of San Domenico) of collections dedicated to the material testimonies of mankind and its environment, from prehistory to our times.

Furthermore, amulets and *ex voto* are a material trace of the rituals in which they would be used and of the myths that established them, which can be reconstructed also through literary sources and research on the field by Giuseppe Bellucci. For some, like the sound-making pebbles, already common in the Classical world with the tale of the eagle who cannot rear its chicks without them, or coral and the Gorgon, we can retrace their continuous presence through centuries; for others, like badger fur, after losing the original myth, it is harder to understand the reasons why this part of the animal has been associated with protective, anti-witch properties. At any rate, we do not want to give strict models of interpretation or force specific readings.

We would rather let the objects speak for themselves, proposing suggestions and hypothetical readings created and stimulated by the comparison between different ages and civilisations (Etruscans, Romans, Egyptians, ours), by the universal and innate need for protection, by the ageless mankind's attempt to free oneself from the corporeal and painful nature of the world.

This "transversal" and, as it were, "universal" attempt to investigate mankind and its deepest needs and fears, is highlighted by the title of the exhibition, which refers to a myth, well-known amongst the Etruscans, according to which our galaxy, the Milky Way, our "cosmic mother", is born from the milk that Hera (Juno/Uni) spilled while breastfeeding Heracles/Hercules/Hercle, the first nourishment for all humans and animals which allows survival and which, through the feminine nature of the goddess, provides the hero with immortality.

MOTHER - ATI

I have a beautiful child who looks like golden flowers, my darling Cleis, for whom I would not (take) all Lydia or lovely (Lesbos)...

Sappho, fragment 132 Voigt

In the ancient world, ever since prehistory, being a woman meant first of all being a mother, and special attention was given to conception, pregnancy, childbirth and to the protection and care of motherhood and the early stages of infancy, as well as to deities (mother goddesses) who protected and allowed the felicitous fulfilment of all of these events, although there are not many direct testimonies about the exclusive relationship between mother and child as told by female voice rather than filtered through a “masculine” point of view of historians, scholars, and Greco-Roman authors.

In the area of the Piceni (6th century BCE), we find heavy knotted rings found in cemeteries, often placed close to the right hand or on the belly of female dead, maybe to highlight their status as mothers, or their power to create life, also related to the goddess Cupra, an Italic goddess of fertility, to whom the rings were dedicated as *ex voto*. In Picenian tombs of the 8th to 6th century BCE, we also often find amulets shaped like cowries, probably to help with fertility, given their similarities to female genitals. They are known as single pendants or in more elaborate compositions, in surprising continuity with contemporary specimens from the Bellucci Collection.

We know the Etruscan word for “MOTHER” (“ATI”, also associated with “APA”, “FATHER”); in votive stelae of central Italy, in Hellenistic times, clay votive offerings shaped like uteri become popular, and they are represented like a sack with some sort of mouth that opens to receive the male seed and then closes to keep the embryo warm which has to grow, or “cook”, as if it were an oven.

At times, some of these uteri are transformed into a sort of rattle (in the exhibition, see a uterus recently acquired by the museum collections), given how they contained pebbles or clay spheres which may represent the growing fetus.

The same could have been true for the sound-making pebbles (or “pregnancy” pebbles, or “eagle” pebbles), which were already deemed necessary by Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia*, 10.12) to eagles in the rearing of their chicks (thus their name of “eagle rocks”). They are a limestone concretion of a globular shape that, because of the detachment of internal pieces, would produce a loud sound upon being shaken.

According to popular belief, they may work as some sort of magnet, used within a strict ritual code, both to avoid miscarriage and facilitate childbirth. If hung from one’s neck or left arm, it keeps the fetus inside the mother’s womb thus stopping miscarriages; tied to one’s left thigh, at the end of the pregnancy, it would help with

the baby coming out. However, be careful to remove it: immediately after the birth, if it is not removed, it would cause haemorrhage and the expulsion of internal organs!

In the Bellucci Collection, many and diverse amulets show the need to protect women during pregnancies, childbirths and childcare, like the so-called “soprallegno”, useful against miscarriages and made from bushes that have grown as parasites onto other plants, thus referring to the very close bond between mother and child; to protect birth-giving mothers, the so-called “eyes of Saint Lucy or Saint Margareth” are used, a small object made from *bolma rugosa* (a spinning-top shaped shell), which more generically protects against curses, by diverting on itself the evil curses, caused by envy, against good health, prosperity and happiness, especially those of weaker creatures like women and children.

Fig. 1: Mater Matuta, a *pietra fetida* sculpture used as an ash container (5th century BCE) and depicting a mother holding a child on her lap. Florence, Museo Archeologico Nazionale

THE MILKY WAY AND BREASTFEEDING

On an Etruscan mirror displayed in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Florence (borrowed and displayed in our exhibition) from Volterra and likely dated to the 4th century BCE, Heracles/Hercle, a bearded, adult man, is breastfed by Uni, the Etruscan counterpart of Hera/Juno, sitting on a decorated throne, richly clad with a tunic, embroidered cape also covering her head, *calcei repandi* (shoes with a curved point), diadem, chest-piece, *armilla*, and rings. Other deities are watching the scene (two male and two female), amongst which we most likely recognise Aplu/Apollo and Tinia/Zeus, who is holding a tablet with an inscription *eca : sren : / tva : ichna/c : hercle : unial : cl/an*, whose translation is debated, apart from the easily recognisable “hercle so (clan) of Uni (unial)”.

This representation refers to the adoption of Hercle, the biological son of Zeus and Alcmena, by Uni; the hero, so the ancient literary sources say, was able to become immortal through Uni’s divine milk. “It is said that this visible circle of stars is called the Milky Way. Indeed, it was impossible for the sons of Zeus to have the honours of immortals, apart from the one who would nurse from the breast of Hera. Thus, it is told that Hermes carried Heracles on the Olympus, after his birth, and attached him to Hera’s breast so that she may breastfeed him. When she realised, the goddess pushed him away, so that (the milk), abundantly spilling, created the Milky Way” (Eratosthenes, 3rd century BCE Greek scientist, *Catasterisms*, 44).

This very milk, which by being spilled would have created the Milky Way, is nourishment for all living beings, as stated by Pliny (*Naturalis Historia*, 18.280-281).

Breastfeeding is considered by ancient sources to be fundamental for the survival of neonates, and also somewhat useful to the mother. As an alternative to mother’s milk (apart from the not-so-popular use of animal milk), the most popular and common solution was to entrust the feeding to wet nurses and nannies, from the same family as the biological mother or at least similar to her, since it was believed that through blood and milk (thought of as deriving from milk) one’s genetic and biologic characteristics were passed onto the baby.

Amongst the most feared calamities, naturally the loss of milk is included, which was avoided through prayer and specific rites, offerings to deities, breast-shaped *ex voto* and protective amulets, in order to avoid, within the ideology of envy curses, that breastmilk would be stolen by another woman, by a curse or a demonic being.

Amongst milk-bringing folk amulets used in our times, the most popular are the “milk spheres”, also called “lattajoli” or “lataruoli”, made from semi-precious stones of milky colour (like agate or chalcedony), that women wear while breastfeeding.

One of the causes for milk loss was the so-called “hair illness”, namely the idea, already expressed by Aristotle (4th century BCE), that a hair could enter and completely clog up a lactiferous duct, thus stopping the exit of milk.

For this real or otherwise presence of hair, the solution was to use a small, fine-toothed comb, usually but not exclusively made of ivory, which is also a remedy against breastfeeding fevers. It is also interesting to note the protective use, found for example in the Spoleto area (Ocenelli di Spoleto), of old, toothless combs against evil eye, which would be worn tied to undergarments by a red string; this use may interestingly remind us of the modern comb found, probably not casually, at the Grotta Lattaia. In this case, the amulet would stop people from “casting an evil eye” and thus making the milk disappear.

Against mastitis, we have evidence of the use of spindles (usually, a tool for weaving), also found in the Grotta Lattaia, which would be hung from the woman’s neck. For protective or therapeutic reasons, some milk drops were dropped on said spindles.

Seahorses and sea urchins (usually their mandibles), known since antiquity as healing remedies for various illnesses, are also associated, in the Bellucci Collection amulets, with the cure of mastitis, maybe also because of the belief that their main power was the ability to extract, attract, drag out, bring towards them, and even suck up, thus unblocking clogged up ducts.

Fig. 1 Bronze mirror from Volterra, from E. Gerhard’s *Etruskische Spiegel*, Berlin, 1897, vol. 5, table 60

THE MILKY WAY

The luminous and irregular band that diagonally crosses the night sky, from the constellation of Cassiopeia to that of the Crux (fig. 1) is the Milky Way, or what we can see from the Earth (on a dark night) of a spiralling disk with 6 arms, with a diameter of roughly 100'000 light years, a depth of 12'000 light years, a mass of 700 billions of solar masses (or 1.4 millions of billions of billions of billions of kilograms, namely 1.4×10^{42} kg) made of gases, dust, 200 to 400 billions of stars, 13.7 billion years of age and a supermassive blackhole in its middle. This technical description is far from the romantic image of a drop of milk stolen from Hera's breast, with which classical mythology describes the formation of the Milky Way (fig. 2). Yet, this luminous band is our galaxy, our cosmic mother: in fact, approximately 26'000 light years away from the centre, along the Orion arm, we find our Solar System (fig. 3).

From the inside, from Earth, the Milky Way appears irregular because of the presence of dust clouds, which black out some of its regions. The most luminous area can be seen by looking towards the constellation of the Sagittarius, where the galactic centre is, which is however hidden by thick dust clouds.

The Milky Way appears to be at an angle in the night sky, because of the inclination of the Earth, but the fact that it divides the night sky into two roughly equal hemispheres means that the Solar System is close to the galactic plane.

Because of the dimensions of our galaxy and the position of the Solar System, we cannot behold the Milky Way in its entirety, nor send a space probe beyond its confines to photograph it. Understanding its shape and structure is thus an arduous task and a research field still very much active within Astrophysics. As lately as 2005, after two centuries of studies, we proved that the Milky Way is a barred spiral galaxy, formed by a central nucleus (70-150'000 light years in diameter), crossed by a bar (35'000 light years of length) mainly made of ancient stars, from which spiralling arms depart, which contain the younger star formations (fig. 4). "Small" (10-20'000 light years) local deformations indicate the interaction with and incorporation of some of the smaller satellite galaxies surrounding the Milky Way.

The whole galactic disk is surrounded by a spherical halo made from very ancient stars and globular masses, but lacking dust clouds. The shape and dimensions of the halo (probably about 200'000 light years in diameter) are not yet determined and may be proof of the interaction of the Milky Way with other galaxies. In fact, ours and the galaxy of Andromeda, that of the Triangle and roughly another 80 smaller galaxies form the so-called Local Group, itself belonging to a larger structure known as the Virgo Supercluster. Because of the dynamic of its interactions with other galaxies, it is estimated that the Milky Way moves through space at a speed of 600 km/s.

Fig. 1 Photo of the Milky Way in the night sky

Fig. 2 Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Origin of the Milky Way*, 1575-80

Fig. 3 Structure of the Milky Way and position of the Solar System (credits: Media INAF)

Fig. 4 Reconstruction of the shape of the Milky Way (credits: NASA/JPL)

GROTTA LATTAIA (CETONA, SIENA)

“In Cetona, people praised the wonders of a natural cave, situated two miles away atop a hillock, and known under the name of Tomba Lattaja (“Milk Tomb”). [...] First, we found a wide open cave, that acts as a vestibule for the deeper corridors. One comes to those through a very tight passage, descending, winding, wet, slippery, and grimy, so that I, with difficulty and not without risking breaking some bones, crept in escorted by a guide with a lit torch. I saw nothing else apart from stocky, calcareous stalactites, stuck and hanging from the roof of a cavity, where the light of day never shines, and on the floor even stockier stalagmites [...]. And since these hanging stalactites are often rounded, ending with nipple-like points, through which water slowly drips, and they are all in all quite similar to huge breasts, this cave was called with the name of Tomba Lattaja”.

Giorgio Santi, Professor of Natural History at the Università di Pisa, *Appunti di un viaggio in terra senese*, 1798

Grotta Lattaia, otherwise known as Buca Lattaia (“Milk hole”) or Tomba Lattaia (as it is shown by small handwritten notes by Umberto Calzoni, displayed here), it is a large natural travertine cave, on the eastern side of Monte Cetona, in the Parco Archeologico Naturalistico di Belverde. The cave is divided into two rooms connected by tight corridors: its name derives from the popular belief that the dripping water had the power to help with breastmilk production in women who had recently given birth (milk-brining properties are associated with many caves and sources in central Italy, like the Grotta delle Pocce Lattaie, Peciano, Pasticcetto di Magione). The cave was explored by Perugia archaeologist Umberto Calzoni, who discovered the cavities of Belverde di Cetona in 1927, during a winter walk with his friends from the “Società Escursionisti Giuseppe Bellucci”, a time in which he was already the director of the Musei Civici. Amongst many, the archaeologist noticed a cave *“which looks northward and has its entrance above the town of Cetona [...] called Tomba Lattaia”.*

The use of the cave is truly quite ancient: it starts in the Palaeolithic, when it was used as shelter, and it continues in the Neolithic and Bronze Age, maybe already with some ritual use. From the mid-republican period, between the 3rd and 2nd century BCE, it became the location of cults dedicated to motherhood and fertility, as it is shown by the many *ex voto* displayed in our exhibition: breasts, anatomical parts, clay heads, sculptures.

The excavations, from 1939 and 1940 (fig. 1), were entrusted by Umberto Calzoni to Gino Tozzi and were carried out in three campaigns: the first one, in 1939, focused on the south wall of the cave together with a “simple well”, filled with irregular blocks of stone, close to the entrance at one metre of depth. From this excavation, many miniature vessels, ladles, small jugs, black slipware, cosmetic

containers, and anatomical *ex voto* were found. Between August and September 1939 and April-June and October 1940, the superficial materials of the deposit were collected, and thus they found statuettes of sitting children and clay statues, restored and displayed for the first time in this very exhibition. The most easily recognisable deities are *Menerva*, who here has a kourotrophic function (namely, she protects mothers and children) just like in Portonaccio di Veio and at the Vignaccia di *Caere*, and probably Hercules, who in Etruria protects infancy and motherhood in those same sanctuaries in Veio and *Caere*, and appears on mirrors together with the aforementioned goddess. Child Hercules is also found in the sanctuaries of Colle Arsiccio di Magione.

This cult activity continues throughout Roman times, as it is shown by coins and vessels until the early centuries of Catholicism, when lamps bearing catholic symbolism are deposited at the cave. Its use in the Middle Ages is proven by majolica shards from Deruta (17th century, fig. 2): in Cetona,(fig. 3), a cycle of frescoes from the 14th century in the church of Santa Maria in Belverde attributed to Orvieto painter Cola di Petruccioli, shows the ancient local tradition to depict the Virgin Mary breastfeeding baby Jesus.

Coins, pendants and small combs show a continuity of use until more modern times. Calzoni notes in his excavation diary that, as recently as 1940, women, after drinking the water, "*leave in a niche on the wall an offering, sometimes a rosary, as I happened to find, sometimes money, as a sly old man told me who, without much shame, had the cunning habit to come in every once in a while to convert into tobacco the faith of those pious women*".

ETRUSCAN BABIES

Swaddled neonates

Archaeological evidence shows how representations of neonates, swaddled from head to toe, are used as votive offerings. At times, details are included such as amulets (like *bullae*) and safety pins which would secure the end part of the swaddling cloth. Soranus of Ephesus (*Gynaecology*, 2nd century AD), advises to swaddle children for a maximum of two months, then to free arms and legs. Other ancient sources call for longer periods of swaddling, and this tradition has survived until modern times. The belief that swaddling, other than keeping the baby's body warm, would also avoid limb and spine malformations has survived until recently. Today, we know that tight swaddling actually has the opposite effect, obstructing muscular development and overall growth: excessive covering also inhibits the natural production of vitamin D, which is mostly triggered by sunlight, thus leading to problems of calcium metabolism and rickets. These children, immobile and under-stimulated, would have probably learnt how to walk quite late (two years old or later, see in fig. 1 the normal motory development of children today), were not reactive and might have suffered, due to poor hygiene, from sores and skin conditions. On the other hand, however, swaddling allowed women to work, freeing mothers from the constraint of constantly caring for their children. Babies, unable to move, did not need strict supervision and could be brought and left anywhere (or alone).

This need to swaddle children tightly may also have had magical and religious reasons, as shown by ancient and medieval sources: a child, if not swaddled, could have easily transformed into a demonic creature, able to tear away its own eyes and ears, to break its limbs, to touch its genitals; they could have been terrorised by the sight of their own limbs and crawl like an animal. The impressive popularity of this practice across time and space may let us conclude that Etruscan children would have been swaddled for the same reasons. Going further, we may suppose that the popularity of bronze or clay images of children sitting may immortalise the difficulties of movement, consequence of this long-drawn immobility.

The child and the bird

"We shall see children greatly desire a fruit; and then, going further, desire a birdie; and then, going further, desire a beautiful dress (Convivio, Trattato 4, 12)".

In medieval times - Dante often notes this in his *Convivio* - until relatively recent times, playing with birds (tied from one of their feet) was a popular pastime for children, and we often find a bird (sometimes a robin or a goldfinch, which refers to the Passion of the Christ) held by Baby Jesus, or accompanying child portraits commissioned by noble families. Agnolo Bronzino (1503-72) depicts Giovanni de' Medici, son of the Granduca di Toscana Cosimo I and of Eleanor of Toledo (fig. 2): a goldfinch is painted in his right hand, which in this context may refer to the clerical career which traditionally second-born children would be destined to. His round face, chubby body under a rich dress, the bird on the right hand and the left arm relaxed along his side remind us of the depictions of children in the Grotta Lattaia.

In Etruscan times, too, children used to play with birds: in the Grotta Lattaia they are depicted whilst sitting, with a plump face and generally well fed, wearing a light, sleeveless tunic, maybe not yet able to walk properly and thus sitting down, with their left leg bent under the right one, which gets out of the tunic and ends in a often naked foot. The left arm, with its plump hand, was relaxed along the child's side, whilst the right hand holds the bird. Chubby little *Arunth* (Arnza), too, from the François tomb in Vulci (4th century BCE, fig. 3), wearing a light, purple-edged tunic, is holding a bird tied to a string, which is maybe about to fly off and thus give precious indications about the future, according to the *Disciplina Etrusca* and the complicated rituals that would regulate the interpretation of bird flight amongst the Etruscans. A bird, a toy and a pastime, but also a powerful symbol, is held by the children in the Grotta Lattaia, by the Putto Graziani at the Musei Vaticani (thus called because of the family of the Perugia noblewoman that used to own it, fig.4) and also from the nude bronzes from the votive deposit in Colle Arsiccio di Magione, displayed in the exhibition; in all of these cases, this image survives thanks to those parents who wanted to immortalise in clay or bronze the beloved images of their children, then dedicating them to the deities worshipped in the Grotta Lattaia or at Lake Trasimeno, to ask for strenght, good health and prosperity.

Fig. 1 Motory development of neonates today

Fig. 2 Agnolo Bronzino (1503-72), Giovanni de' Medici, son of the Granduca di Toscana Cosimo I and of Eleanor of Toledo, Uffizi

Fig. 3 François tomb, Vulci, *Arunth* (Arnza), 4th century BCE

Fig. 4 Putto Graziani, Musei Vaticani (first half of the 2nd century BCE)

GROTTA LATTAIA - THE SCULPTURES

Votive material, including large objects and partially displayed here, was also collected during the research campaigns carried out between August-September 1939 and October 1940, in the superficial strata of the deposit, especially in the middle area of the southern end of the cave.

These fragments, to this day only minimally published, interpreted as being sitting statues of *kourotrophoi*, namely breastfeeding women or *kourophoroi* holding babies in their arms, were restored between 2021 and 2022. Despite the accurate research work and fragment recomposition, it was impossible to reconstruct the whole statues, which us a sign that this deposit was only partially investigated by Umberto Calzoni, or that part of the material was transported and lost during illegal digs.

Whilst waiting for further research that may confirm or debunk the presence of other material evidence still *in situ*, we present here the preliminary results of the restoration of the materials kept in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell'Umbria. During this intervention, it has been noticed that the large clay shards belong to standing figures and not sitting ones, only slightly smaller than lifelike, coming from three to four statues of similar dimensions and probably dated to a period between the 2nd and 1st century BCE. One of these, with stocky limbs, dark red skin and larger size (with a height of approximately 140-150 cm) may be a male figure, wearing a tunic (*chiton*) and a cape (*himation*), which winds around his arm and left hand, completely covering them, and whose hem, wrapped in tight folds (*sinus*), diagonally crosses the chest, from the right side to the left shoulder. The right arm and hand are completely free and bending at the elbow. The right hand seems to rest on the edge of the cape, although it is hard to gauge whether the palm was open or if the fingers were bent and holding the hems or some lost object. A similar pose characterises a second statue, slightly smaller (100-110 cm), with ochre skin, whose right arm is strongly bent, apparently still following the folds of the cape's hem, whilst the left arm and hand are wrapped by it. We also have the left arm wrapped by the cape and the lower portion of the body of other clay statues; their partially preserved legs end with feet covered by tall, soft boots, similar to those worn by the Orator (fig. 1) or the more recently discovered in San Casciano Bagni, thus are probably coherent with the representation of a male figure. A foot wearing a sandal (feminine?, fig. 2) might have also belonged to the lower parts of statues. Less probably, it could have been a foot-shaped *ex voto*, a type which is however more often found naked, without shoes. Fragments of large faces and hairstyles, both male and female, confirm the theory that there would have been statues of both genders, of good artisanal and artistic, originally painted.

Their different sizes may show, as it is seen in San Casciano Bagni and other sanctuaries, that there would have been votive offerings of different size and quality, according to different economic statuses and different classes of the offerers. Large sculptures were however part of a homogenous group, because of their stylistic and technical characteristics, and they were thus likely coming from one or more local

workshops. Interesting, but hardly likely, is the hypothesis that they may have come from the same offerer, and would have represented his family. According to this view, the different dimensions might have been linked to the presence of men, women and children, of different ages and height, but members of the same family. More likely, they represent worshippers (depicted in prayer or as offerers?) visiting the cave, who have left their own votive offering and their own image, apparently anonymous or maybe carrying a now lost painted inscription which has left no visible trace. The lack of traces of objects that they may have held which may give more interpretative elements, makes it hard to identify them as deities or cult statues. The statues nonetheless have a small base (observable in those statues whose feet are preserved) which may have been fixed onto another support, which leads us to hypothesise that there would have been altars or tables for offerings, maybe even a small temple for worship, as it is suggested by the rooftiles that were found according to the excavation diaries. It is thus quite compelling to imagine that, just like in the sanctuary of Demeter in Macchia delle Valli (Vetralla, Viterbo, fig. 3-4), near a natural cave or a source, there would have been small shrines, inserted in fissures in the rock walls.

In the aforementioned example, it is a small structure of *peperino* (volcanic tuff), with a gabled roof, still containing a small clay cult statue (50 cm height), interpreted as being Demeter/Ceres/Vei, holding a plate and maybe ears of corn. Within the shrine, there was also an altar and a ritual table in *peperino*.

Fig. 1 the Orator, from Pila, Perugia (Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze)

Fig. 2 foot with sandal

Fig. 3 rock sanctuary in Vetralla, Viterbo

Fig. 4 rock sanctuary in Vetralla, Viterbo

GROTTA LATTIAIA BEFORE THE VOTIVE DEPOSITIONS

Geology and Prehistory

Natural environment

Grotta Lattaia (fig. 1) is a large natural cavity, situated at 515 metres above sea level on the eastern side of Monte Cetona (Siena), within a travertine formation from the Quaternary. It develops into two main floors, with its longer axe going NE-SW (higher floor 60 m of length, lower 30 m), with a total drop of 25 m.

It has been explored in 1972-73 by the Associazione Speleologica Senese, who has curated a detailed survey of it (fig. 2).

From its very large entrance, you can easily access a wide ellipsoidal room from which a long winding corridor (20 m) develops, opening on the left side, as well as a tight tunnel which descends into a secondary, smaller room, at the end of the main cave. The lower room, accessible through two small wells along the right side of the cave, has a considerable drop (20 m) and a very irregular plan; in this area - and also in the small room at the end of the cave, both hard to reach - there is a concentration of stalactites and stalagmites. The main room is characterised, on the other hand, by a large and thick concretion on the wall opposite the entrance; it is white and translucent, and it is born out of a long and continuous horizontal crack of the rock wall. The central area of the higher cave is filled with large blocks, fallen from the roof back in very early stages of the formation of the cave, partially covered in stalagmites.

The most ancient phases of use of the cave

The excavations in 1939-40 revealed prehistoric materials, shortly described by Umberto Calzoni in the publications of 1940 and 1942. After a very sporadic occupations by people in the Middle Palaeolithic - maybe around 50'000 years ago - today we have found traces of consistent use in the Neolithic and subsequent phases.

Neanderthals used the cave as occasional shelter, maybe together (or in competition) with a great cave bear (a specimen found in the Grotta Lattaia is also in the Museum, fig. 3). Some painted ceramic sherds are dated to the Middle and Late Neolithic, similar to some produced in the South and the coast of the Adriatic sea.

From the Neolithic onwards, some of the caves on Monte Cetona were used as burial sites, but only in the Early Bronze Age do we have certain proof of cults connected to underground environments, in the area of Siena.

There is not enough evidence to say that Grotta Lattaia was a place of ritual even in prehistory and protohistory. However, we cannot exclude that the roots of a cult use of the cave, only surely proven from the 3rd century BCE, may come from much more ancient times, even from the Neolithic. In fact, the first confirmed traces of the use of cave water for ritual/medicinal reasons are from this time: for example,

relatively close to this area, we have the Grotta dei Meri (Monte Soratte, Rome), and Pozzi della Pianta close to Terni (the materials are found in the prehistoric part of the Museum). In the Grotta Scalongia, close to Manfredonia (Foggia), there is water coming both from the dripping from the roof and from a small pond inside the cave, and there is proof of use of the cave since 6000 years ago, when people in the Neolithic would use it as a place of cult and burial and deposit some exceptional painted vases, which were slowly incorporated into rock formations.

Fig. 1: entrance of the Grotta

Fig. 2: Survey from the Associazione Speleologica Senese

Fig. 3: The *Ursus Speleus* in the Museum

THE BASE FROM G. CONESTABILE

Like in Greek visual arts, children are also present on the “rilievi chiusini” (bas-relief from Chiusi) with *prothesis* (laying to rest) scenes: on a cube-shaped stone element from Monaco we see a young boy raising his hand to touch the bier; on one from Copenhagen, a young boy positioned next to the head of the *kline* (the funerary bed) is raising his left arm to his head and his right clenched fist to his mouth, in grief; on a fragment from Palermo, on the other hand, a young girl is sitting on a stool and is being pushed closer to the *kline* by an accompanying woman, who puts her hand on the child's shoulder.

On a base of a funerary monument from Perugia (a donation to the city museums by G.B. Conestabile), we observe the heart-wrenching last goodbye of a child, torn away from his final embrace with the dead. The other smaller grieving figures, in a procession before the dead, must also be interpreted as being children.

Most of the people represented as taking part in the funerary rites must have been family members and relatives of the dead, together with several acquaintances joining them for one last goodbye.

On a black-figure Attic *pinax* from the Louvre (fig. 1) we find a *prothesis*, very similar to the ones on the rilievi chiusini, by virtue both of the scene's disposition and of the characters' gestures. The many inscriptions found on it reveal the family relations between the dead person and the bystanders: the woman touching his face is his mother, the young girls accompanying her in front of the *kline* are his younger sisters, the woman at the bier is his grandmother, the three other women are his aunts (one paternal), and the bearded man at the end of the funerary bed is his father, depicted in the act of welcoming visitors.

This iconographic scheme must have become known to Etruscan artists indirectly, given the fact that Attic finery reliefs have not been found outside Greece. This transmission probably happened through the trade of tapestries or painted canvasses, unfortunately lost because of their perishable nature. The large number of reproductions of this model and the amount of detail in the representations may nonetheless suggest that these were real funerary rites, actually practised by the Etruscans.

This base, already known in Perugia from the 1700s, has a complex figurative decoration along the entirety of its perimeter; this decoration seamlessly connects a *prothesis* scene and a sacrifice scene.

In figures 2 and 3 we see the drawing (mostly imagined) that appears in A. F. Gori's edition of *Museum Etruscum* (Firenze, 1737-1743), and the drawing appearing in G. B. Conestabile's book *Dei monumenti di Perugia etrusca e romana, della letteratura e bibliografia perugina. IV. Monumenti etruschi scritti e figurati, risultanti da escavazioni diverse nel territorio di Perugia ed in parte esistenti nel museo in collezioni private di detta città, in parte in musei esteri, in parte smarriti* (Perugia, 1855-59).

Prothesis: In the middle, we see the *kline* (bed) where the body is laid to rest; on the sides, two women, dressed in a Greek fashion (with a *chiton* and a *himation*), are desperately grieving; in the foreground, a servant is laying the shroud and, behind him, **a woman (probably from the family) is holding a baby who is stretching his little hands towards the dead's face. A procession of cape-clad men approaches from the left, they all have different sizes and are**

represented expressing their mourning through gestures of great desperation. From the right, behind the figure on the funerary bed, a group of five *chiton*- and *himation*-wearing women arrives: the first woman brings her left hand down to her waist, the second one turns her head back and lifts her left hand in prayer, the third one is veiled and her hands on her waist, the fourth one is turning towards the figure behind her whilst striking her breast, and the last one, also veiled, bring her left hand to her side.

Sacrifice: on a large altar, we see a pile of timber prepared for the sacrifice. Above it, a cloud is represented, probably alluding to the divine signs that the Heavens may send to the priest and that the priest is waiting for in order to continue with the rite. Indeed, on the right, we find a priest with a curved staff in his hand who is waiting for a favourable time to start the ceremony; behind him, two girls are covering with a mantle a boy, who represented while making the same gestures as the priest. Towards the end of the procession, a woman is turning her head to three mantle-clad men who are holding a curved staff in their right hands.

The two scenes are strongly connected; therefore, the viewing of the dead man must have happened near an altar and a sacred space, which we know was sometimes inside the necropolis (see the necropolis of the Cannicella in Orvieto, of the Cuccumelletta in Vulci, and the Melone del Sodo II necropolis in Cortona).

THE SYMPOSIUM (BANQUET) ON THE SPERANDIO SARCOPHAGUS

Just like in Greek representations of it, oftentimes Etruscan banquets and symposia (namely the end of the banquet, specifically reserved for drinking) include images of children, usually recognisable because of their smaller size. If this difference is not just a convention to represent a hierarchical subordination between servant and master, then we are actually observing non-adult characters, depicted while standing and playing the double-flute, or attending to the table, holding a sieve (*colum*, used for wine filtration) and a ladle (*simpolum*, used to pour wine from the krater), or a *colum* and a small jug used as a ladle.

Dancing scenes on the rilievi chiusini, where we see figures of different sizes and thus probably different ages, may confirm the possibility that they are indeed children, probably servants, although we cannot categorically exclude that they may have been from the same family as the banqueters.

The Sperandio sarcophagus (from the homonymous necropolis), excavated in Perugia in 1843 but produced in Chiusi, is decorated with an exceptional figurative scene on the long side and two symposium scenes on the short sides.

The interpretation of the main scene is still debated: it could be the celebration of a triumph, with related war booty, following a military victory; it could also be the displacement (migration) of an entire family clan (accompanied by their slaves). Both possibilities can be true, if this were the sarcophagus of a man from Chiusi who may have moved to Perugia after one of his city's military victories, probably within the context of Chiusi's expansionist campaigns during the reign of king Porsenna (end of 6th century BCE).

Side A (front). Triumph (fig. 4). A busy procession of men and animals solemnly walks from left to right. At its head (far right), four men (three of them bearded), with bowl cuts, are bound to each other from their necks: the first is holding a staff in his right hand; the second is holding a bag in his left hand and a goatskin on his shoulders; the third man is trying to undo the knot on his neck with both of his hands; the fourth one is carrying a *situla* (bucket) in his left hand while putting a goatskin on his shoulders with his right one. Behind them, a woman lifts her right arm in the air and, as she turns, exchanges gestures with the man and the woman who are following her; the woman of this couple walks with the aid of a staff, while the male figure, who is carrying two spears on his shoulder, stretches his right arm out. Two mules follow, carrying household goods; in between them, a man is goading them with a whip while holding a *machaira* (curved sword) in his left hand. Next to the mule, in the background, a mantle-clad man is animatedly exchanging gestures with a figure behind him, who is holding two spears in his left hand and is carrying a bag through a strap on his forehead. Behind him, two oblique-mantle-wearing men walk solemnly, both carrying spears; the one most to the rear, as he turns, makes a sign with his right arm towards the two figures ending the procession, who are leading two oxen and two goats. The first one of this couple lifts a spear up in the air; he is turning back towards the second one (who is also holding a spear under his right arm) and exchanging gestures with him.

In the background of the scene we see two small trees and, under the first mule, a dog sniffing the ground.

Side B (right side). Symposium (fig. 5). A small, naked servant, holding a *colum* (sieve) and a ladle in his hands, serves wine to three recumbant men on two beds (*klinai*). The man on the right *kline* is holding a large zither and a plectrum in his lifted hand. The men on the other *kline* are exchanging gestures and loving gazes; the man on the left is balancing a double-handled cup (*kylix*) between his fingers and appears to be ready to through his wine on the *kottabos* (a party game in which you have to make a small plate fall from its stand by hitting it with the last drops of wine from your cup). On the ground, we see liquid containers (for the water and wine which would be mixed together). Garlands are hanging from above, a sign that this is an interior scene (or that this is at least a tent or a gazebo).

Side C (left side). Symposium. Three men on *klinai* are depicted while a young naked servant is serving them wine. The three banquetees are exchanges gestures and glances, lifting their hands in the air. A large basin or krater is set on the ground, on a tripod. Three garlands hang from above.

Captions

Fig. 1 - black-figured Attic *pinax*, Musée du Louvre (from Wikipedia)

Fig. 2 - A. F. Gori, *Museum Etruscum*, Florence, 1737-1743 - *prothesis* detail

Fig. 3 - G. B. Conestabile, *Dei monumenti di Perugia etrusca e romana*, Perugia, 1855-1859 - drawing of the monument base from Perugia

Fig. 4 - Sperandio sarcophagus

Fig. 5 - Sperandio sarcophagus - short side, symposium (drawing by M. A. Turchetti)

SOUND-BASED TOYS

Psychologists, neuropsychiatrists and childhood experts all agree that playing, meaning first of all a free, fun, and entertaining activity, is of prime importance for the healthy and balanced growth of children, and it is fundamental to developing movement, creativity, and cognitive abilities; furthermore, it also gives the first occasion to interact with others and develop social solidarity, and to explore the world while preparing for life as an adult.

Young and old, humans and animals, have engaged in free and spontaneous playing since the dawn of time: in the study of the ancient world and, specifically, of the archaeology of children, the relevance of playing and games has grown considerably in these past few years, within the analysis of cultural mechanisms with which societies fixate models of behaviour based on gender and age group.

It is, however, not always easy in archaeology to assign a 'playing' value to objects. An example of this ambiguity comes to us from the numerous ancient rattles, found also in tombs of women and children, as well as in sanctuaries, so that it is difficult to see it exclusively as a "sound-based toy", because they may first and foremost be sacred, magical objects used by holy people in rituals.

In many cases, they can also be protective amulets and talismans, that look surprisingly similar to some rattles and bells for children, also seen in the Bellucci collection.

Amongst the sound-based toys, compared to similar toys from our times, coming from Luciano Zeetti's Museo del Giocattolo ("Museum of Toys"), we note the small piglet on top of which there is a crouching boy, holding onto the animal (from the Guardabassi collection). Mobile elements inside the toy produce sound if the piglet is shaken, and thus let us class it as a rattle. Small figurines of children riding various animals have been linked to the journey to the Afterlife, and pigs are often used in funerary meals or as offers for chthonic deities and yet, in this specific case, we may rather connect it to fertility rites and to the protection of young children. Children, in the ancient world, are often depicted while playing with animals, and we also found rattles and pacifiers shaped like piglets, with their small snouts acting as a spout with holes to suck milk from. The small spheres inside this "baby bottle" could have had an anti-hiccough function (as it avoids the ingestion of air bubbles); however, once the bottle is empty, these spheres are free to move, thus helping the child fall asleep or simply entertain them.

Dice, astragals, and game pieces (for tabletop games) can also make sounds and noises by being thrown, and they have been found inside children's tombs but also sanctuaries, where they were used in divination rites.

On an Attic red-figure *chous* (5th century BCE) from the collections of the Museo del Vino (Museum of Wine) in Torgiano - which would have been given to three-year-old Greek children during the Anthesteria, a spring festival in honour of Dionysus,

in order to celebrate their first taste of wine - we find a representation of a toy wagon, simply made by attaching one or two wheels to a rod.

An Etruscan mirror from the Bellucci collection (4th century BCE), similar to a mirror found in CastelViscardo, is decorated with the representation of a winged boy, sitting on a rock and holding in his hands an instrument made of two strings stretched around a central wheel. It's a toy called *inyx*, whose name comes from a bird called *inyx torquilla* (European wryneck), and this toy would be played with by tensing and loosening the ends of the strings, making the wheel move. Naturally, it would have been used as a simple toy, but it could have also symbolised the uncertainties and pains of Love. Theocritus (315 BCE – 260 BCE), in his second idyll, tells the story of a woman who invoked the bird, sacred to Apollo, so that her lover may magically “turn back” (just like the bird) and come back to her.

A spinning top, of a flattened biconical shape, found in Orvieto (end of the 4th – beginning of the 3rd century BCE) and produced locally, has been shown (through radiological analysis) to have contained eight pebbles, which would have produced sounds during its rotation. Their use as *ex voto* is proven by the presence of an identical object found by Umberto Calzoni in Grotta Lattaia and displayed here for the first time. Similar conclusions can be drawn for the many clay spheres, in one case accompanied by a child's hand, found in the Colle Arsiccio sanctuaries in Magione. Undoubtedly, it would have been a pastime, seamlessly used from the ancient times to ours, but it could also have been linked to children's health and healing rites – it therefore does not surprise that they are often found (on their own or held by children) on votive reliefs: amongst the most recent discoveries, we have the representation of a boy with a *bullia* found in the “Bagno Grande” sanctuary, in San Casciano.

CREPITACULA CREPUNDIA TINTINNABULA

Crepitacula, *crepundia*, *tintinnabula*: they are onomatopoeic words that, in Roman times, indicated rattles made from various materials, sound-based toys used mainly to distract, amuse, calm down or put children to sleep, but also as magical and protective amulets. *Tintinnabula* are toys with little bells, *crepundia* are those that include various elements of diverse materials and shapes which could be struck together and thus make a sound, often hung around children's necks, arms and wrists. *Crepitacula*, on the other hand, are toy-amulets which are spherical, or rattle-like, spinning tops, at times decorated, inside which we find mobile elements that produce sounds.

Tomb 45 in Norcia (Edilblock excavation) contains the inhumation of a three-year-old, potentially dated to the second half of the 1st century AD given the presence of a Domitian *as* (coin) from 82 AD inside the tomb. This burial is characterised by the uniqueness and wealth of its grave goods, the quantity and elegance of its glass vessels, the presence of four seashells, and a bone doll's head (which may suggest that this was the burial of a young girl) characterised by a tall hair-do which seems to follow the trends set by empresses at the end of the 1st century AD. The presence of iron nails may reveal that originally we would have had a wooden coffin or a bier, for which we, unfortunately, have no evident traces. At times, they have been assigned a symbolic meaning, as if they were used to "fixate" the dead person to their new condition, stopping them from going back into the realm of the living while at the same time giving them a symbolic way to defend themselves. Different coins, usually found on the mouth, the hand or the chest of the dead, as it is in the aforementioned tomb, are to be seen as payment for the ferryman of souls, Charon. A high number of them can also be used to denote status: the wide diachronic variety of coins is striking and denotes that each mint would have circulated for a long time.

A small bracelet (*armilla*), worn on her right forearm, made with bronze wire with overlaid extremities and a sliding system to regulate its width, has a bell-*tintinnabulum* as a pendant, itself made of bronze and a mobile element of red glass paste. The *armilla*, a common ornament for boys and girls, is to be treated, by virtue of its bell, as a small musical instrument of the idiophones (percussions), just like the clay *tintinnabulum* found in the burial, with a clapper supposedly made with perishable materials (such as a thin string and a small clay sphere) which was therefore not found.

Eight tear-shaped and bud-shaped pendants made of green glass, found near the left humerus, may have belonged to another bracelet, now lost, from which thin bronze strings would have been hanging, which would produce a soft and rustling sound with every movement, thus classifying it as a *crepundium*, following Latin terminology.

These bracelets with bells, found still attached to her wrists, and the clay *tintinnabulum*, found near her feet, would have amused the infant with their noises and we may imagine that, apart from protecting against curses and evil spirits, they

would have helped the parents with keeping track of their child as she crawled and ran inside and outside the house.

The *bulla*, made by two bronze leaf valves held together by a trapezoidal loop, embossed with concentric lines of dots, would have been worn around the neck, by a string of perishable material, of an eighteen-month-old infant, buried in a pit burial from Norcia, in the Opaco necropolis. The funerary assemblage, mostly comprising black slip ware, allows us to date it from the end of the 3rd century BCE to the first half of the 2nd BCE.

The *bulla*, between its perfectly closed valves, contained two pebbles, a phenomenon which cannot be attributed simply to the conditions in which the *bulla* was found; radiographies and the restoration of the *bulla* have furthermore shown how no other material penetrate the object.

Bullae would have contained herbs, animal remains, amber or glass beads, textiles, or hair, all with protective function against curses and illness; it is worn, in Rome and Etruria, by both men and women, young and old. As the 'Romanisation' process unfolds, it begins being worn by male *ingenui* (offspring of free citizens), from their birth to maturity, and its use survives (as a unisex ornament) until Late Antiquity and the first half of the Middle Ages. Despite a large quantity of iconographic and material evidence, we rarely know what each *bulla* would have contained, sometimes cited in text sources that explained the protective and magical properties expected of *bullae*. In our particular case, the pebbles may let us believe that, apart from its usual magical and protective role, this *bulla* would have also been a small rattle and, more specifically, a *crepitaculum* just like the spherical, rattle-like, spinning top-shaped, decorated ones mentioned above.

Fig. 1 Norcia, Edilblock excavation, tomb 45 (work in progress), detail

Fig. 2 Norcia, Edilblock excavation, tomb 45, bracelet with bell and glass mobile element

Fig. 3 Norcia, Edilblock excavation, tomb 45, bracelet with glass bells

Fig. 4 Norcia, Opaco area, tomb 101, bronze *bulla*

COUNTING MAGIC AND WITCHES

The preoccupation with the physical well-being and the livelihood of newborns and infants, together with the possibility of premature death, has led people, ever since antiquity, to feel the need to find a plausible explanation to them, which literally materialises as it were in evil and demonic figures, *sagae* and *veneficae*, creatures responsible of such terrible events. The *striges* in Ovid's story (*Fasti* 6,131-168) have a large head, fixed eyes, the beak of birds of prey, white feathers, and hook-like talons, similar to some nocturnal birds like the eagle-owl and the barn owl (*Tyto alba alba*), which is characterised by its large, disk-shaped face. They were believed to fly at night looking for children and they feast (*vitiant*) on their bodies, snatched from the cradle; their name, *striges*, derives from their terrifying nightly screeches. Whether they were birds from the beginning, or old women able to turn themselves into birds through an enchantment, they cut children open and drank their blood.

Popular tradition reports, even until our times, many ways and amulets to avoid and avert their curses. In the Bellucci collection, we find an impressive amount of amulets, almost all coming from Italy, made from body parts of European badgers (*Meles meles L.*): strips of hide and fur, sometimes rolled and tied with metal wire, front and back paws, dried and tied with metal, and cleaned and polished long bones. Giancarlo Baronti, in his study "Tra bambini e acque sporche" ("Amongst children and dirty waters", 2008), dedicates a whole chapter to this theme and notes that in 1955, a university student who had come to Pietralunga (PG) to work on her thesis, had observed that a majority of young children still wore a tuft of badger hair on their chest, held by a clothespin.

Witches, sneaking into houses at night, would suck mothers' milk or newborns' blood, leaving them with bruises and haematomas, ultimately leading to their death. What to do then?

Protection can come from the hide and hair of the badger, a nocturnal animal with very strong nails who, just like the witches, hunts at night after exiting a burrow dug deep into the earth...

Although ancient sources do not explicitly mention the protective properties of badger hair, more recent texts and oral testimonies show how it was believed that witches, who notoriously cannot be out during the day, would have to count said hairs until dawn (the so-called "counting magic", "magia della conta") and would not be able to have enough time for their evil doings...

The use of a hedgehog's mandible is also based on the principles of "counting magic": before acting, the witch is forced to count all the stings that the animal from which the mandible came used to have. The same principle applies to the use of the fishing net, about which the witch has to learn how many times it has been lowered into the sea, or of the millstone, about which she needs to guess how many times it has turned.

There is also evidence for the anti-witch use of prehistoric stone tools, which have been found in two child enchytrismoï from Roman times, in Scandicci (Florence).

Fig. 1 Badger hair, Bellucci collection

Fig. 2 Hedgehog mandible, Bellucci collection

Fig. 3 Lithography depicting a European badger (K. Gessner, *Historiae animalium liber I. De quadrupedis viviparis*, 1552).

MEDUSA AND CORAL

The origin of coral is a painting (oil on board) made by Giorgio Vasari in 1570 for the study room of Francesco I del Medici and now kept in Palazzo Vecchio.

Vasari himself describes his painting in his “Ricordo” (“Memoir”) on the 18th of September 1570: “Nel qual tempo mi convenne fare una lastra, dipinta a olio, dov'è Perseo, che sciogliendo Andromeda, nuda allo scoglio marino, et havendo posato in terra la testa di Medusa, che uscendo sangue dal collo tagliato, et imbrattando l'acqua del mare, ne nasceva i coralli” (“At that time, I had to make a board, oil-painted, where there is Perseus who unbinds naked Andromeda from the sea rock and put the head of Medusa on the ground, from whose severed neck blood flowed and, by staining the seawater, created coral”).

Vasari is inspired, with a degree of variation, by Ovid's version of the myth in his *Metamorphoses* (6,570-572), according to which Perseus, after overpowering and killing the sea monster that threatened the Aethiopian princess Andromeda, washed his hands after putting Medusa's head down on some damp seaweed. The blood flowing from the Gorgon's severed head transformed the seaweed into red coral, and sea nymphs multiplied the effect of this miracle by sowing its seed in the sea.

Medusa, daughter of the deities Phorcys and Ceto, after being slain by Perseus, does not lose her ability to petrify her enemies with her gaze and, always according to Ovid, thus gives these sea plants the power to harden when exposed to air, as well as apotropaic and protective properties, according to popular perception: these properties were the reason why coral was one of the most popular amulets in Antiquity, a medicinal remedy for perfect mother's milk, for protection against curses and various illnesses, and a protective ornament for young and old..

Teething, convulsions and childhood illnesses

Teething time is one of the most important phases of the human life cycle, because it symbolises the detachment from maternal dependence and the beginning of a more varied diet, thanks to a newfound ability to chew. Amongst the amulets in the Bellucci collection, we find teeth from animals of prey and saprophages, such as wolves, pigs, wild hogs, and dogs. Thus, child teething is symbolically connected with the strength and power of these animals' teeth, and the teeth themselves also have the role of “chew toys”, so that the children would be able to relieve the gum pains associated with teething by chewing on them.

Keys of various sizes and metal objects are used against convulsions, whereas [pietre stellarie o stregonie]¹, because of their small dots pattern, protect against pinworms, just like shark's teeth do.

Fig. 1 The birth of Coral, G. Vasari (1570)

Fig.2 Complex amulets, Bellucci Collection

¹ non sono riuscita a trovare un significato per queste (neanche in italiano, non ero a conoscenza della loro esistenza e non ho trovato nulla su internet)

FUNERE MERSIT ACERBO

“*Funere mersit acerbo*” is the first half of a verse in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (*Aen.* VI, 429), translated often as “overwhelmed by bitter death, come too soon”, and it refers to children who died during their infancy and whose voices and cries deeply struck Aeneas as he entered Hades, during his *katabasis*. It is also the title of one of the most delicate and poignant poems in “Rime Nuove”, a collection by Giosuè Carducci, written in 1870, after the premature death of his young son Dante, of only three years of age: the poet invites his late brother, who had died young in unclear circumstances, to lovingly welcome Dante in the realm of the dead.

In antiquity, the death of infants and children has been defined as premature and too sudden. In the 7th century AD, Isidorus of Seville was writing that “*tria sunt autem genera mortis: acerba, immatura, naturalis. Acerba infantum, immatura iuvenum, merita, id est naturalis, senum*”. If this “bitter” destiny is the one of infants, for Publilius Syrus (1st century BCE) and Virgil, children, infants and young people all fall under the definition of “*funere mersit acerbo*”.

In Roman society, these children were honoured through the celebration of said “*funus acerbum*”, nightly funerary rites lit by torches and quite simple, to highlight how unnatural it is for the offspring to die before their parents, who are then forced to bury the ones that should have buried them instead.

In fact, the ancient world had an incredibly high rate of child mortality, because of poor hygiene, lack of medical advancement and poverty of a very large portion of the population: it is believed that 30-40% of children would have died within their first year of age, while in Imperial Rome a third of the population would have died before reaching the age of ten.

In general, in ancient societies, children were not considered a proper member of society but rather a “creature” to protect and nurture until their maturity (for males, childhood would ritually end after their fifteenth year of age), when finally they would gain their own dignity and autonomy as a true citizen.

The word “*infans*” itself, meaning “who does not speak”, defines the child negatively, by virtue of what they cannot do or be.

This may explain why in Rome neonatal children were buried in houses, despite one of the laws of the Twelve Tables forbade intra-mural burials (*hominem mortuum in urbe neve sepelito neve urito*, X, 1; Cicerone, *De legibus*, II, 58) and *mos maiorum* (“the customs of the ancients”) would strongly suggest not to mourn their death too much. At the same time, the *vis vitalis* (life force) of those who had not become full-fledged people yet still remained within the domestic realm, almost protecting the house and its inhabitants.

Literary and epigraphic evidence, especially from Imperial Rome, a more richly documented time, undoubtedly show the desperation and strong sense of remorse for these losses. “What kind of mother” - Ovid (1st century BCE - 1st century AD) writes “if not a crazed one, should not cry the loss of her child?”.

Moreover, Martial (Epigrams 3,54) writes one of his most poignant epigrams for a young girl, dead at the age of six, while Fronto (2nd century AD) openly and bitterly mourns the death of his young nephew.

The tombs of this exhibition, from the pre-Roman and Roman world, show a great deal of attention paid to the deaths of young (and very young) people, both through the burials of neo-natal children in necropoles (in pithoi or tiles) and through the rites and ceremonies reserved to children who died in their first years of childhood, which are not dissimilar to those reserved to adults.

Therefore, though they were not yet real members of society, they still receive special attention (funerary rites and practices), which shows the care for the time of childhood and the tenderness and love of those who gave birth and raised them.

A EROTION DI MARZIALE
AFFIDA AI GENITORI L'OMBRA DI EROTION

To you, father Fronto and mother Flacilla, I commend
this girl, my pet and darling.
Little Erotion must not be frightened by the dark shades
and the monstrous mouths of Tartarus' hound.
She was due to complete the chills of a sixth midwinter, no more,
if she had not lived that many days too few.
Let her now play and frolic with her old patrons
and lispily chatter my name.
Not hard be the turf that covers her soft bones, be not heavy upon her,
earth; she was not heavy upon you.

(trans. by Shackleton Bailey)

FUNERE MERSIT ACERBO
Giosue' Carducci

O thou who on yon flowery hill art lying,
And by thy side our father too is sleeping,
Dost thou not hear, through the tall grasses sighing
Upon thy grave, a little voice of weeping?

It is my little one, who, trembling, crying.
Knocks at thy silent door, who here was keeping,
Thy memory green in that great name undying,
And who like thee has fled this life of weeping.

Ah no, for playing in a flowery place,
Smiled on by gracious visions fair and bright,
The Shadow wrapped him in his cold embrace.
And thrust him to thy shores of desolate night.
Oh, take him to thee, lest he turn his face,
Seeking his mother, and the sun's sweet light.

(trans. by Lois Saunders)

MINIATURE GRAVE GOODS AND TOYS

In the pit burials with grave goods from Norcia, we observe the tendency to depose miniature grave goods, namely pottery items which - because of their dimensions, function, and meaning - are intentionally made to be different from “regular” vessels. Generally, in the ancient world miniature pottery is found as dedications in sanctuaries or used, though not exclusively, in child burials. The vessel types, mostly identical to those used in adult burials, just smaller, may make us think that (at least in Norcia) their function and meaning might have been the same, but that the use of smaller pottery items meant to highlight the age and status disparity, whether they were used during the children’s lifetime as toys, or during specific funerary rituals, or they symbolised the transitional status of the children, not yet fully-fledged members of society, who would have started using regular vessels if it had not been for their untimely death. Often, we find ollas (large pots), sometimes closed with a stone, which may indicate a now lost offering of some liquid, just like in adult burials. These ollas would often contain another small vessel, probably used as a ladle to pour the liquid, and which would have had one handle broken off (to symbolise perhaps the ‘breaking’ of life in death, or maybe to indicate that the object exclusively pertains to the dead person and may not be used for anything else). The olla would be often put close to the pit, in a separately dug hole, which suggests that it would have been part of a specific ritual performed by the members of the funeral procession. A significant difference from adult burial is the retrieval, usually in young girls’ tombs, of clay and bone female figurines, and of miniature weapons (supposedly in young boys’ tombs). These figurines, made through a stamping technique, are shaped like standing maidens with draping garments, which resemble in their style and typology the so-called “tanagrians”, namely representations of young women made in Athens before 330 BCE and found in burials from Tanagra and Myrina. The statuettes from Norcia also show close resemblance to the ones found in cemeteries in Greek southern Italy, especially those in (supposedly) children’s burials. In particular, apart from the clothed representations, the best comparison for the nude clay female figurine with draped mantle, leaning on a column (found in tomb 41), is a female figurine from Taranto, probably a representation of Venus and related to the cult of Dionysus through her ivy crown, which can also be recognised (though it is represented in a more abstract and stylised fashion) in some specimens from Norcia. In Norcia, some are missing the head (either ritually broken off, or maybe lost due to being made of wood or wax), others have heads which can be inserted on the body through a hollow neck. The fact that we find other tombs (tomb 36 and 45) where only the head was found may lead us to think that the body may have been made of textile, or another perishable material. Undoubtedly, their function as toys is highly plausible (especially for the jointed ones). These Greek, southern Italian, and Roman dolls, such as the famous maiden from the tomb of the vestal Cossinia, made from ivory and entirely jointed, would not have represented babies to nurture, but rather richly dressed young women. Therefore, they were symbolising the feminine ideal towards

which girls of marriage age should aspire, exactly as it happens today with our modern and sophisticated “Barbie dolls”.

Oftentimes, these clay figurines are dedicated in sanctuaries and explicitly refer to those rites of passage for young girls going from childhood to adulthood: in Greece, young brides would have offered their toys to Artemis or Aphrodite, in Rome they would offer them to the Lares - domestic deities that protected the home and its inhabitants. Young boys would instead offer their *bullā* (childhood talisman), which would equally symbolise entering adulthood. Based on this, another interesting conclusion can be reached about the dolls in tombs: they may have characterised young girls in their social role, not yet as brides but ready to reach that stage. The perfected fulfillment of female life, completed by marriage and children, is suddenly interrupted by death: therefore, young girls will have their toys with them forever, as they are eternally maidens and eternally indulge in their childhood games, or even because their marriage is now ideally completed, as it were, in Hades. Weapons may then be the equivalent for young boys of these bone and clay figurines. In particular, we may focus on the presence of miniatures of iron double axes. This weapon is a very ancient symbol (and object). It was known in the Minoan and Mycenaean world since the 2nd millennium BCE, and it can be a weapon, a sacrificial or work tool, a symbol of civil and religious power able to find continuity (together with the rod) in the well-known Roman *fasces*. In local child burials it may have had more than one meaning: it could have been a reference to the future martial virtues of the boy; it could have been a symbol of the higher classes (note how, because of conservatism in children’s burials, these may have maintained weapons as a status symbol longer than their adult counterparts, after a process of “Romanisation”); they may have referred to sacrificial victims killed in the context of rites of passage into adulthood, or even to a particular skill of the child, like woodworking or carving (see how, in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus builds his own marriage bed, as well as the raft that will save him from Calypso, with a double axe; moreover, in Pithecusa we find masonry tools in the tombs of two boys, 8 and 11).

Captions

Fig. 1 Norcia, Edliblock excavation, tomb 12, lekytoid-shaped unguent vase

Fig. 2 Norcia, Edliblock excavation, tomb 30, female clay figurine

Fig. 3 Norcia, Edliblock excavation, tomb 41, female clay figurine

Fig. 4 Norcia, Edliblock excavation, tomb 38, miniature double axe

ROOF TILE INFANT BURIAL

In the necropoles in Norcia (PG), several burials of pre-natal infants were found, and they were buried between two concave roof tiles: one is used, as it were, as a cradle for the child, the other seals the burial, ideally symbolising the roof of a house. Anthropometrical studies concluded that they were foetuses who had died following a miscarriage, or infants who passed either at the moment of birth or very soon after. These burials are generally found amongst adult tombs (fig. 2) with whom, we may suppose, they would be related although, in some cases, there is evidence that an area of the cemetery would have been exclusively for infant burial (fig. 1).

These roof tiles burials are different from the more popular “*enchystrimos*” burials, in which the dead person (or infant) is deposited in clay containers: it is a very ancient and established tradition, already known in the 2nd millennium BCE in Anatolia, in the Aegean, in Greece, and particularly in the Roman world, until the 7th century AD, with the many amphora burials (in the exhibition: burials from Scandicci, Florence).

Archaeological and literary evidence show that, in ancient Italy (and, in modern times, within indigenous communities), it was commonplace to bury infants in the family house, either under the flooring or under the roof's eaves (in Latin *suggrundaria*, with *grunda* meaning “eave”).

However, much archaeological evidence shows that infants could also receive burial within cemeteries: similar customs as the ones in Norcia are observable in Narce and in Latium, but more frequently in the Picenum area and in Abruzzo (L'Aquila area), where roof tile infant burial is popular from the Iron age until at least the Hellenistic period.

in Norcia, most of these depositions, dated from the 6th century BCE to Imperial times, are not accompanied by grave goods, so much that they have been at times identified as “poor” burials, although the fact that we find rich adult burials and “poor” infant burials in the same cemeteries renders this interpretation less convincing.

Norcia's case shows that it is possible that infants would have received a specific rite, namely this roof tile burial, which may have symbolised the protection of a house even when they were actually deposited in a cemetery. The lack of grave good is not indicative of a poorer class to which the infant would have belonged, but rather it indicates that the societal relevance of these individual was still at an “embryo” stage, whereas young boys and girls who had survived their weaning stage, started growing teeth, and learnt to walk and speak, would receive tombs comparable to adult ones, with a rich array of meaningful grave goods.

Captions:

Fig. 1 Norcia, Colle dell'Annunziata, roof tile burial

Fig. 2 Norcia, loc Campo Boario, adult pit burial and roof tile burial

Fig. 3 Norcia, Colle dell'Annunziata, roof tile burial

ORORIOUTH, PROTECT ZENOBIA, GENERATED BY DOMITIA

An ellipsoidal hematite gemstone from the glyptic collection of the Museo (3rd century AD, fig. 1), presents on its lower face the depiction of a uterus with a spherical cervix, with three filaments (*tube*) on top of it, and a cylindrical neck ending in a horizontal tract (*musculus recto uterinus*) on which two oblique segments on the right side are ending. The organ is controlled by a lock made of seven teeth that crosses its lower and left side, ending in a double handle.

All around it, and on its upper side, we find a Greek inscription. The upper inscription can be translated as “Ororiouth, protect Zenobia, generated by Domitia”.

The first word, surely the name of a deity invoked in the spell, might itself contain a definition of the female organ, deriving from an Egyptian word meaning “uterus” (w'r.t), and the prayer indicates that this amulet was used to heal a serious illness befalling a woman called Zenobia.

The symbolic representation of the uterus is linked to the belief, confirmed by Plato (*Timeus*, 91c), that the uterus was an autonomous part of the body, governed by the moon, whose contractions caused pain and illness: thus, the magical tools used to remedy them aimed mainly at placating these movements and the spells, like the one on a Byzantine amulet (fig. 2) would also say: “uterus, black uterus, who contorts like a serpent and roars like a lion, sleep now, like a lamb”

The magical spell of the amulet from the Guardabassi collection recalls, apart from Zenobia, the so-called matronymic (Domitia), the name of her mother, thus subverting the usual Greco-Roman tradition of remembering patrilinear descent. The change of this common legal formula is typical of the “reversal” of order which is typical of magical thinking, which is in this particular case highlighting the unbreakable bond between Zenobia and her mother.

The uterus is also depicted with a lock at the base of the cervix, whose key could close or even open the organ, aiding fertility or causing a miscarriage, or, simply, controlling menstrual flow and haemorrhage, to which the use of the red hematite may refer.

Other times, as it is seen on a gemstone in Vienna (fig. 3), the uterus is surrounded by deities, with Chnoubis in the middle, who would control and placate the organ. The serpent god and lion-headed Chnoubis is often depicted together with Isis, Nephthys, Osiris, Anubis, Harpocrates, Bes, Chnoum's or Amun's ram. These gods were all connected, in one way or another, with procreation, pregnancy, childbirth, and childhood: Isis generated Horus/Harpocrates and breastfed him, Osiris impregnated Isis and, with his secretions, generated plants and controlled the Nile's flood, Harpocrates was a child god, Bes was a protector of children and of Horus, Chnoum was a god of creation.

Breastfeeding was also aided by Chnoubis' amulets; indeed, the late antiquity geology book by Socrates and Dionysus (Socrates et Dionysius, *de lapidibus* 36) advises: “another onyx rock. Completely black in appearance. It is useful to

pregnant and breastfeeding women. Three-headed Chnoubis is sculpted on it". The efficacy of all these magical semiprecious stones was connected to the fact that Chnoubis/Chnoum was a god who controlled the flood of the Nile, and thus would have been able to control the menstrual flow, help with milk production and heal haemorrhages, bleeding ulcers and irregularities in digestive fluids in the stomach. The lion-headed serpent Chnoubis is also the symbol of the zodiac sign of the Leo, connected to the god of creation Chnoum and Horus/Harpocrates. This sign was associated with the floods of the river Nile which would start under its astral influence. Chnoubis thus became also a symbol of the sun-god, as it is shown by the radial crown that he is wearing on a green chalcedony in the Guardabassi collection (fig. 4, 2nd-3rd century AD), identified as the planetary deity Yaldabaoth and Yaweh, who according to the apocryphal gospel of John had "*the shape of a dragon, the face of a lion with fiery eyes, darting and flaming*".

Fig. 1 Hematite from the Guardabassi Collection with the representation of a uterus
Fig. 2 uterine gemstone with an image of Medusa: from J. Spier, *Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets and their Traditions. Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 1993, no. 56, 25-62

Fig. 3 Gemstone with Chnoubis standing between mummified Anubis and Isis, on top of a uterus (from H. Köhler, *Erleuterung eines von Peter Paul Rubens an Nicolas Claude Fabri de Peiresc gerichteten Dankschreibens, Mém. Acad. St. Petersburg*, VI sér. 3, 1834, table III. 19)

Fig. 4 Green chalcedony with Anubis, Guardabassi Collection

MOTHERHOOD AND INFANCY IN ANCIENT EGYPT

In order to face the dangers linked to pregnancy and childbirth, the Egyptians elaborated a series of beliefs on how to protect mother and child, now considered magical superstitions but back then considered as valuable as medical knowledge. Many of these traditions were related to a specific deity, amongst which Isis was the most important (fig. 1).

Sister and wife of the king of the dead, Osiris, she started acquiring from the 2nd millennium BCE the same powers as the goddess Hathor, thus personifying the idea of the feminine. Her figure and her conception of her son Horus from her deceased husband were used to create myths and stories focused on the difficulties that she went through during her pregnancy in the swamps of the Delta of the Nile. Thus a cycle of stories developed in which Seth, Osiris' brother and nemesis, along with other ill-intentioned deities would try to tear the fetus away from Isis' womb. However, the goddess always managed to prevail, firstly thanks to her skill as a sorceress. These stories were believed to have miraculous and protective properties against the potential issues of pregnancies, but also more generally against illnesses.

An amulet specifically used against miscarriages was called the "knot of Isis" or "*titi*-knot" (fig. 2 amulet 8). The knot is actually made of two tied pieces of cloth used as a pad. According to the myth, Isis inserted it inside her womb to prevent Seth from taking her growing fetus away. Red rocks or glass beads were used in the knots to stress their close connection to menstrual blood.

Within the cycle of Isis' myths, her son Horus was also a fundamental character (fig. 3, statuettes no. 56 and 57), in his alter-ego of Harpocrates (the Greek adaptation of Egyptian *Hor-pa-khered*, "Horus the boy"), often represented while being breastfed on his mother's lap or, in small stelae, stepping on crocodiles or holding dangerous animals (snakes, scorpions and lions) while being surrounded by hieroglyphs used in the stories about Isis' pregnancy, which would have given the stele itself magical properties. The water poured on it could have been drunk in order to heal from the venom of snakes and scorpions.

Pregnant women, especially during childbirth, would have been under the protection of the goddess Toeris (fig. 4, amulets no. 58 and 68), who drew her protective powers from the animals that were part of her iconography. She had a hippopotamus head, lion arms and legs, and a crocodile tail in the middle of her back. Her connection to womanhood, fertility and procreation was highlighted by her cow ears, feminine bosom and pregnant belly. Toeris was often represented with a cylindrical element on her head, which symbolised the plumed double crown, typical of queens and mother goddesses.

There are other deities who, despite lacking the typical features of women or children, often appear in contexts in which divine intervention is needed to favour fertility help with pregnancy and childbirth, or to protect people during the delicate, initial phases of growth. They are Bes and Pataecus, grotesque versions of mainstream major deities, the Sun and Ptah that were supposed to incite laughter

and thus push illness away. Bes is particularly linked to the feminine and childhood sphere: he is a naked, deformed dwarf represented frontally. He also has a thick, mane-like beard. In some representations, he is sticking his tongue out, wearing a plumed crown, or holding a shield and sword. In other cases, he is represented while dancing to the sound of a tambourine. Bes was thought to have very high protective powers, thus, in Egypt, we find him on innumerable amulets and decorative sculptures from *mammisi*, special buildings where the birth of a god was worshipped, especially known to be inside sanctuaries of the Ptolemaic period. Through the centuries, Bes' popularity expanded beyond the confines of the Nile valley and reached the entire Mediterranean, until Roman times.

Fig. 1 amulet shaped after Isis *lactans* (breastfeeding), British Museum AE 63797

Fig. 2 "Knot of Isis" amulet

Fig. 3 Horus/Harpocrates

Fig. 4 Toeris and Bes

“THE MILKY WAY”

Motherhood and Childhood from Antiquity to the Bellucci Collection

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