The Educated Midwife in the Roman Empire
An example of differential equations

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Summary

This paper deals with both the reality and the idealization of training of midwives in the Roman Empire. It aims at a full survey of the existing source material (mainly literary and epigraphical sources, though iconographical and papyrological evidence has been included in the discussion). For the first time, a complete collection of the epigraphically attested Latin cases will be given. Moreover, I will deal with the apparent contradiction between the image of the educated midwife as it is exhibited mainly by Soranus, and the picture of midwives as low class women as it is revealed in other sources. In doing so, I will make use of the concept of differential equations, as applied by Joshe and Murnaghan concerning women and slaves in ancient society. As such, I will take issue with the Cilliers and Retief thesis about the social role of women in ancient medicine.

Introduction

Various ancient sources testify of the perils involved in pregnancy and giving birth for both mother and child.

Literary sources keep referring to this danger. Well-known is Medea’s lamentation on the sorrows of women in Antiquity. First, women with a dowry are given in marriage to a man who becomes lord and master of their body. They don’t even know whether he will be a good husband. Once married they have to try to come to terms with him. Athenian men live out of doors: they are involved in politics or wage war. Women are said to live a safe life indoors: ‘They are wrong. I’d rather be three times in the battle line than have to give birth once to a child’.

Latin poetry has taken up the motive of risky pregnancy. In a

(*) I am indebted to Hugo Coomans for his apt translation of my Dutch original.
– according to modern standards – less than elegant manifestation of pathos Statius describes the women who attend the funeral of their children tottering and with milk-heavy breasts, beat their wet breasts in mourning and quench with their milk the smouldering ashes of the funeral pyre. In an elegy to his friend and patron Stella Statius beseeches the goddess Lucina and the coming baby to keep intact the physical integrity and beauty of Stella’s young wife.² In a heated thrust at pampered rich women Juvenal quotes the fact that lower-class women suffer the pains and risks of a confinement and in addition feed their children in the absence of financial means to pay a wet nurse, whereas hardly one woman of the elite is with child in her golden bed.³ There is a shocking and ominous ring in the statement which says that a child whose birth causes the mother to die augurs well.⁴ Also the early Christian emphasis on female chastity may be considered in this perspective: multiple sexual relations enhanced the risk for women of pregnancy and the perils attendant on this condition.⁵

Neither do historical testimonies on fatal pregnancies lack. Julia, Caesar’s daughter and for reasons of political alliances given in marriage to Pompey in 59 BC first suffered a miscarriage in the summer of 55 BC when she heard of the false rumour that her husband had been killed in a street riot. She died in September 54 BC after another miscarriage: the little girl would survive her for only a few days. According to Plutarch both Julia and Pompey were crazy about each other; Pompey being a passioned lover who knew how to please women, as testified his courtisane Flora.⁶ Cicero was disconsolate when his daughter Tullia passed away. She died aged 31 or 34 in February 45 BC owing to the effects of the birth of her first son. Probably the baby followed suit. Soon after the conception of the child she had divorced her husband Dolabella by whom she had already had a miscarriage in

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1 E. Med. 230-250. See especially vv. 250-251 κακῶς φρονοῦντες· ώς τρίς ἄν παρ’ ἀσπίδα | στήναι θέλοντ’ ἄν μᾶλλον ἢ τεκεῖν ἀπαξ.
2 Stat. Silv. 5.5.15-17: Si qua sub uberibus plenis ad funera natos/ ipsa gradu labente tulit madidumque cecidit/ pectus et ardentes restinxit lacte favillas. About Stella’s wife, see Stat. Silv. 1.2.268-275.
3 Juv. 592-594: Hae tamen et partus subeunt discrimen et omnis/ nutricis tolerant fortuna urgentem labores./ sed iacet aurato vix alla puerpera lecto.
5 Van Houdt (2003) 120.
6 On Julia’s miscarriages and death, see Plu. Pomp. 53.1-4; D.C. 39.64.1. On Pompey’s family life, see Bradley (1991) 166-169.