



DĀYA

DĀYA, wet nurse (Mid. Pers. *dāyag*, Av. *daēnu-*, “female animal,” Kurdish *dā*, *dī*, *dīa* “mother,” Sanglechi *dāya* “nurse”; cf. Oss. *dāin*, *dāyun* “to suck,” Pashai *dōy* “to milk”). Despite the mammalian instinct to suckle the young, in some societies or social groups women other than the mothers are employed to nurse infants. In some cultures it is even forbidden for women to nurse immediately after giving birth, perhaps a vestige of the ancient belief that colostrum is indigestible and thus harmful to the infant (Deruisseau, p. 548). Early Muslim physicians expressed this concern in the claim that the humors in the new mother’s body are such that her milk may be harmful. In the 11th century Ebn Sīnā (p. 305) and in the 12th century Esmā’īl Jorjānī (p. 209) recommended that new mothers wait a few days before breast feeding. In addition to this concern, the social activity of upper-class mothers must have contributed to perpetuation of wet nursing (Deruisseau, p. 550). Even in the 11th-century text *Vīs o Rāmīn* the wet nurse complains that Vīs’s mother surrendered her daughter immediately after birth and took no interest in her upbringing until she reached her teens (Gorgānī, p. 46).

Wet nurses can be either human females or other mammals; in the latter instance the infant may be placed directly under the animal’s udders (Radbill, p. 21; Brunning, p. 7; Schlieben, p. 25; Tran, pl. I). In legend heroic infants are often suckled by animal nurses (Thompson, I, motif no. B535), for example, Midas by ants, Cyrus by a bitch, and Croesus, Xerxes, and Lysimachus by mares (Radbill, p. 23; Herodotus, 1.122; cf. Binder, pp. 18-22). In the *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsī Zāl is nursed by the legendary bird Sīmorǧ, who feeds him on



blood, and Ferēdūn by the cow Barmāya (ed. Khaleghi, I, pp. 61, 167, 169). The reverse practice, in which human females nurse animals, is also attested since antiquity and persists in some cultures (Tran, pl. 58/144; Jelliffe and Jelliffe, p. 170 fig. 9.7; Radbill, p. 26). In 19th-century Persia lactating women suckled puppies, in order to relieve the discomfort of swollen breasts (Katīrā'ī, p. 36).

In Zoroastrian sources (Māhyār Nawwābī, p. 480; Dhabhar, p. 154) there is evidence that children were often suckled by wet nurses in pre-Islamic Persia. In Gorgānī's *Vīs o Rāmīn*, based on a Parthian original, the *dāya* plays a prominent role. In the *Šāh-nāma* Sām's own former wet nurse is the only one who dares tell him of the birth of his albino son, Zāl; Rostam is breast-fed by ten wet nurses (ed. Khaleghi, I, pp. 164, 270). The Sasanian Yazdegerd I sends many wet nurses with his son Bahrām, whom he has put in the care of the Arab king Monḍer, but Monḍer chooses four noblewomen, two Persians and two Arabs, to nurse Bahrām. After four years the prince is weaned, with great difficulty (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Mohl, VII, p. 269). According to Ebn al-Balkī (p. 111), the Sasanian Yazdegerd III (632-51) owed his life to the sagacity of his wet nurse, who, when he was an infant, anticipated the threats to his life and rushed him away to Eṣṭakr, where the nobles raised him in safety.

The Qur'ān (65:6, 2:233) left the choice of suckling or hiring a wet nurse to the mother. In Persia both pre-Islamic custom and Islamic scriptural sanction thus ensured that the practice of wet nursing continued, especially among the upper classes. The 11th-century author Keykāvūs b. Eskandar (pp. 147, 153; cf. Naṣīr-al-Dīn Ṭūsī, p. 222) considered employment of intelligent, chaste, and kind wet nurses one of the duties of a father toward his children. The special kinship between the male infant and his wet nurse carried with it a sexual taboo (Qur'ān 4:27) against marriage with the wet nurse or with individuals suckled by her; this taboo required a clear definition of the concept of suckling in Islamic law. There was disagreement among early authorities over the extent of breast feeding that defined this specific type of foster parentage (*raẓā'a*). Some companions of the Prophet Moḥammad thought at least five feedings, others three, others only one (Ebn al-Naqqāš, pp. 560-62; cf. Šāfe'ī, pp. 159-62; Hāfeẓ, pp. 192-93; Hojawī, pp. 321-23; Māzerī, II, pp. 161-68). In Shi'ite law it is stipulated that a child must be suckled at least fifteen times in sequence by one woman before this condition of foster parentage is established (Abū Ja'far Ṭūsī, IV, p. 204; Qomī, I, p. 524).

In pre-Islamic Persia, as in many other cultures, it was believed that bad characteristics could be transferred through the nurse's milk to the child



(Māhyār Nawwābī, p. 480; cf. Radbill, p. 22; Tansillo, pp. 25-27, 37, 39; Jelliffe and Jelliffe, pp. 167-69). Imam ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb is reported to have said that the same care should be taken in choosing a wet nurse as in selecting a wife, because breast feeding can influence the character of the child (Qomī, I, p. 523; cf. Ġazālī, II, p. 27; Katīrā’ī, p. 37; Massé, *Croyances et coutumes*, p. 49; Šahrī, p. 46; Hedāyat, p. 116). By extension the word *dāya* thus also assumed the meaning “tutor,” even a male tutor. In the *Šāh-nāma*, for instance, Rostam is called the *dāya* of Sīavoš (for other examples from the *Šāh-nāma*, see Dehḡodā, s.v.). According to folk belief in Persia, not only the character but also the mood of the nursing woman may influence the baby’s constitution. For example, if the wet nurse is upset, her *šīr-e jūš* (milk of anxiety) may produce a speech impediment in the child (Šahrī, VI, p. 47; Hedāyat, p. 40).

Before bottle feeding with baby formula was introduced in Persia wealthy and middle-class families hired wet nurses for their children (Mostawfī, *Šarḡ-e zendagānī* I, p. 154; Katīrā’ī, p. 36; Massé, *Croyances et coutumes*, p. 49; Sheil, p. 149). Nomadic women were especially sought (Polak, I, p. 195). There is a remarkable similarity in descriptions of the ideal wet nurse in Indian, Greek, Roman, Arabic, and Persian sources. She should be between twenty-five and thirty-five years old, of good complexion, of medium build with a broad chest, wise, and good-natured. She should have given birth between twenty days and slightly more than two months before wet nursing begins, and she must not have miscarried. Her nipples must be firm and moderately large and her milk white, sweet, and neither too watery nor too thick; it can be tested by allowing a drop to fall on a level fingernail, where it should bead and adhere and should run when the fingernail is inclined (Jorjānī, p. 209; Ebn Sīnā, pp. 366-67; Rabban Ṭabarī, pp. 97-98; *English Translation* II, pp. 225-28; Deruisseau, pp. 552-53; Katīrā’ī, p. 36; Šahrī, VI, pp. 46-47). Sometimes wet nurses were hired for infants suffering from diarrhea, vomiting, and bellyache after being nursed by their own mothers (Šahrī, VI, p. 45).

The wet nurse was prohibited from having sexual intercourse while nursing (Jorjānī, p. 209; Ebn Sīnā, p. 369) and was expected to maintain personal hygiene and always to smell good. In winter she was to warm her breast before suckling and in summer to cool her nipples in water. She was to feed the infant at regular intervals and to test her milk every few days to ensure that it had a pleasant taste. If the taste was unpleasant, she was to improve it by eating apples, persimmons, melons, and other efficacious foods. The infant’s natural parents would make sure that such foods were available to



her (Šahrī, VI, p. 48; Katīrā'ī, p. 36; Jorjānī, p. 209; Ebn Sīnā, pp. 367-68; Rabban Ṭabarī, p. 98). Once the foster child was grown and independent the wet nurse often assumed an important position in his household (Gorgānī, pp. 46, 99-100, 110-11; cf. Livy, 3.44.7; Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 8.10; Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.632-33 apud Rosen, p. 558).

In Persia Muslim women believe that nursing a Christian child might bring them harm, whereas a woman who has nursed a *sayyed* (claiming descent from the Prophet) is assured that her breasts will not burn in the fires of hell. If a wet nurse should stop lactating, she should sit facing Mecca while *āš-e rešta* (see *ĀŠ*) and two sous (*šāhī*) worth of milk are pounded in a mortar and served to her (Massé, *Croyances et coutumes*, p. 49; Hedāyat, p. 194).

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