



“Breastfeeding Throughout History”

This document is intended solely to provide context for the images recreated for the Amamanta 2026 calendar, “Breastfeeding Through History.” Through this work, we aim to make a small contribution to understanding the evolution of a practice as natural and ancestral as breastfeeding. A biological act and one of profound love, which has shaped women and motherhood throughout history.

Time and again, women were constrained and denied the freedom to enjoy breastfeeding their children and to develop a fulfilling motherhood, to the point that the human capacity to nourish our children was called into question, favouring laboratory-produced formulas deemed “perfect” for a capitalist world in which money took precedence. And although we still encounter this reality today, much has changed thanks to the work of great women such as those who sustain our association, Amamanta.

Returning to the purpose of this text, we reiterate that, always from an informed and well-substantiated perspective, we have sought to portray twelve breastfeeding scenarios throughout history. We have focused on our own history—Western history—and on that of cultures to which our society is connected for various reasons. This is not intended to be taken as a scientific study, but rather as an introduction to the history of breastfeeding.



“Breastfeeding was an evolutionary resource, a profoundly cultural act whose duration in each time and place was affected not only by dietary factors but also by social, economic, and even religious variables.” (Bermúdez de Castro)

Prehistory

During prehistory, breastfeeding was the unquestioned form of human nourishment. Studies based on skeletal and dental remains have shown, through sophisticated scientific testing, that more than 65 million years ago our female ancestors breastfed their offspring for at least two and a half years.

One of today’s leading scientific advocates of breastfeeding is José María Bermúdez de Castro. This renowned paleontologist, former director of the National Research Centre on Human Evolution and scientific co-director of Atapuerca, has stated that “throughout this time, breastfeeding was an evolutionary achievement established in mammals as a way for mothers to feed their young with a substance—breast milk—that had unquestionable properties enabling offspring to thrive, not only as nourishment but also for the development of their immune system.”

During the Neolithic period, around 10,000 years ago, a drastic change occurred in human diet with the emergence of the first agricultural and sedentary communities. It is known that this affected our nutrition with the onset of animal domestication and crop cultivation. Some studies in anthropology and evolutionary biology suggest that at this time there may have been a reduction in the duration of breastfeeding in certain communities, due to the greater availability of foods derived from animal milk and cereals, although these hypotheses are still under investigation.

Antiquity

In Antiquity, societies began to become far more complex, which had a collateral impact on infant feeding, especially among the upper classes. Breastfeeding remained the primary source of nourishment and survival for newborns, but mothers from the social elites stopped breastfeeding their babies themselves. The reasons for this were both aesthetic and social. It was believed that breastfeeding harmed women's physical appearance and, moreover, that it prevented them from continuing to conceive—a primary function of queens and empresses. In addition, these women had an important public role that distanced them from the intimate act of breastfeeding, leading them to delegate the feeding of their children to other women. In this way, the figure of the wet nurse emerged.

However, this does not mean that breastfeeding was not valued in ancient civilizations; on the contrary, very ancient texts discuss it from both medical and economic perspectives. The oldest of these is the famous Code of Hammurabi (circa 1800 BCE), written in Mesopotamia. It contains regulations regarding the work of wet nurses, specifying their working conditions and the payment for their services, thus demonstrating the economic and social importance of this role.

In 1550 BCE, in Ancient Egypt, a medical compendium known as the Ebers Papyrus was written. It includes descriptions of infant care and recommends positions for breastfeeding. It also mentions diseases related to lactation and sets out ways to improve the quality of breast milk.

Texts have also survived that offer guidance in a more everyday context, advising children to honour their mothers by reminding them of the sacrifice they made in breastfeeding them: “she offered her breast to your mouth for three years, with patience... Now that you are in the flower of your age, that you have taken a wife... turn your eyes to how you were brought into the world, to how you were breastfed, as the work of your mother.”

At the pharaonic court, wet nurses who breastfed the children of royalty were not merely servants, but held very high social and political status. Their role went far beyond mere nutrition, as they created a symbolic and sacred bond that united them with the monarch for life. This relationship was so strong that the wet nurse came to be regarded as an “adoptive mother,” a fundamental figure in the upbringing of the king.

Beyond the court and written texts, breastfeeding also appears in mythology. The image of Isis, one of the principal deities, breastfeeding Horus is among the most representative of this culture. Goddess of motherhood, protector of the family and symbol of legitimacy, Isis, enthroned, nurses her son, destined to become the god-king of Egypt. Through this image, an iconography was created of the mother who transmits, through a sacred fluid, the power to become the protector and saviour of humanity. It can be considered the precursor to the “Virgin of the Milk,” which would become deeply rooted centuries later in medieval Christian Europe and would establish the universality of the archetype of the divine mother.



Greece and Rome

In other ancient civilisations, we also find references to breastfeeding, such as in Ancient Greece, where it was a subject of debate and was reflected both in mythology and in literature. Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle referred to breastfeeding and advised that mothers should nurse their own babies. Soranus of Ephesus, considered the father of obstetrics and gynaecology, advocated breastfeeding for up to two or three years. Nevertheless, the use of wet nurses was widespread, especially among wealthy families.

The same occurred in Rome, where breastfeeding was theoretically valued, but in practice the use of wet nurses was common among the elite. Cultural and social pressure within the patrician classes was stronger. In a society in which the concept of family lineage (*gens*) was so important, women were expected, on the one hand, to preserve their beauty and youth, and on the other, to continue bearing children for the family line. Having wet nurses among one's household staff was a sign of noble status: the more wet nurses a family could afford, the higher its social standing.

However, if there was one place in Ancient Rome with special significance for infants and mothers, it was the so-called *Columna Lactaria*, a kind of charitable institution. It is known to have been located in the *Forum Holitorium*, a very busy market area. Its main purpose was to serve as a place where babies could be brought to be fed by wet nurses—hence its name, the “Milk Column.” Families with limited resources, in which mothers were unable to feed their babies themselves, went to the column to obtain nourishment for their children. It also functioned as a meeting point where women—often enslaved or from poorer classes—could be hired as wet nurses.

Although the column was destroyed in the 1st century BC, the tradition of hiring wet nurses in its surrounding area continued well into the 20th century, demonstrating the deep-rooted nature of these social practices.



Breastfeeding in Al-Andalus

Breastfeeding in Al-Andalus, as in other Islamic and medieval societies, was a matter of great importance from a medical, social, and religious perspective. Andalusī medicine, heir to the classical tradition and to the wisdom of the Islamic East, devoted considerable attention to this subject.

The Qur'an regards breastfeeding as the best way to feed infants and as a right of infants. It is valued both for its nutritional benefits and for its influence on the mother-child bond.

During the height of Al-Andalus, the practice of breastfeeding was seen as a fundamental pillar for both child health and social structure. Beyond its nutritional value, breast milk was considered a divine gift and a sacred bond between people. Midwives, birth attendants, and female physicians played a crucial role in society, advising families and ensuring that breastfeeding was carried out in a healthy and successful manner.



Medieval Christian Europe

After the fall of the Roman Empire, the formation of medieval Christian Europe began. Far from being a dark and ignorant period, these thousand years of history saw the emergence of forms of government, artistic styles, theological debates and scientific developments that would shape the future of Europe.

During this period, breastfeeding was a subject of great interest to physicians, theologians and authors of conduct manuals. Ideas on the subject were strongly influenced by the classical tradition—especially the writings of Soranus of Ephesus—and by Christian religion. Medical treatises included specific chapters within broader manuals on gynaecology, obstetrics and infant care.

Although both medicine and the Church generally advised that a mother should breastfeed her own child, it was common practice—particularly at court and among the nobility—to employ a wet nurse. Medieval texts often focused on the qualities expected of the ideal wet nurse. She was expected to be young, healthy, of good character, free from harmful habits and, preferably, of a religion and social background compatible with that of the family.

Medieval physicians believed that the quality of breast milk depended directly on the woman's diet and on her physical and moral condition. It was thought that temperament could be transmitted to the child through milk. For this reason, wet nurses were advised to maintain a balanced diet and a calm lifestyle, avoiding anger, melancholy or sadness. Milk was considered “white blood” or “digested blood,” which explains the importance placed on the health of the mother or wet nurse.

It was also advised that the baby should not be put to the breast immediately after birth, based on the belief that colostrum—the first milk—was “imperfect” or “unhealthy,” as it was thought to be a residue of menstrual blood and therefore should be avoided. Babies were often given water with honey or sugar instead. This idea stemmed from Hippocratic and Galenic medicine and persisted until very late periods.



Pre-Hispanic Cultures

In the various pre-Hispanic cultures, breastfeeding was a deeply rooted practice, with a meaning that went far beyond simple nourishment. It was a sacred and social bond; an extension of the cycle of life, an unalterable link between mother and offspring, and a fundamental element for the continuity of the community.

In the mythology of pre-Hispanic Mexico, the concept of the “tree of milk” is closely linked to the belief in Chichihualcuauhco, a sacred place within the mythological worldview. According to Mesoamerican cosmology, this nurturing tree was the destination of the souls of children who died prematurely. It was a paradise of fertility and sustenance. From the branches of this tree hung breasts that flowed with milk, feeding the infants and ensuring that the deceased children did not suffer hunger while they awaited another opportunity to be reborn, as it was believed that milk was their only possible nourishment.



Juana I of Castile

(1479–1555), daughter of the Catholic Monarchs, had six children with Philip I of Castile. Although there are no specific records confirming or denying whether Juana breastfed any of her four daughters or two sons, we have chosen to adopt the position that she did, at least at some point during their upbringing.

There are texts which claim that “contrary to the customs of the time, she breastfed her children without the help of wet nurses. Such was her abundance of milk that, had she not expressed it naturally, she would have suffered infections and extreme pain. Philip appears to have taken pleasure in this habit of his wife and, boasting of it, proudly allowed the ladies of the court and even certain gentlemen to be present during breastfeeding.”

The custom in her time and social position was to employ wet nurses within the household. It was considered that women of the court should devote their time and energy to affairs of state, diplomacy and representation of the Crown. Breastfeeding was regarded as a task more appropriate to women of lower social rank.



17th Century

Motherhood in the 17th century was in a period of transition. While the figure of the nurturing mother—that is, the one who breastfed—was idealised in art and in moral essays, in practice, social differences determined who took on that role. The wet nurse remained an important social institution until the 19th century. The use of wet nurses among wealthy families became increasingly widespread, no longer limited to the court and the nobility, but extending also to the upper bourgeoisie, which by this time was firmly established in positions of economic power.

This pattern was particularly evident in Spain, France and England, where the trend began of hiring wet nurses of rural origin. The social motive lay in the expectation that upper-class women maintain a public image, along with persistent false beliefs about the supposed harm that breastfeeding could cause them. Unfortunately, the fact that many infants spent their early years living with their wet nurse's family—often in very precarious hygienic conditions—led to an increase in infant mortality rates.

The situation became so widespread that, in the 18th century, the management of wet nurses in Paris turned into a matter of major social and public health concern. It was overseen by an institution known as the Bureau Général des Nourrices of the City of Paris. Founded in 1769, this office became the principal intermediary body for families seeking a wet nurse and was among the first to regulate the practice of delegated breastfeeding. It assisted in the hiring of wet nurses and sought to ensure their hygiene and physical health, as well as to monitor their moral conduct and social standing.





19th Century

In the 19th century, women's incorporation into factory work and the harsh reality of industrial labour radically transformed breastfeeding practices. What had once been a family-based, rural activity became a practice deeply affected by industrialisation and urbanisation. Mass migration to the cities, factory working conditions and changes in family structure profoundly altered the way infants were fed. Many mothers were forced to leave their babies for long working hours, making on-demand breastfeeding impossible. This situation led to an increased reliance on wet nurses or to the adoption of alternative feeding methods, which contributed to the spread of disease and a rise in infant mortality rates. It was towards the end of this century that infant formula began to be developed.

At the same time, the first initiatives aimed at protecting motherhood began to emerge. In countries such as France, crèches (day nurseries) were established, some of which included spaces where mothers could breastfeed their children during the working day.

In Spain, the Law of 13 March 1900 on the working conditions of women and children included, in Article 9, the right of mothers to breastfeed their babies during their working hours.

In 1919, the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted the Maternity Protection Convention, which for the first time established universal principles such as the right to maternity leave and paid breaks for breastfeeding.

20th Century

During the 20th century, in a period marked by post-war social change and intense industrialisation, infant formula ceased to be merely a substitute used in cases of necessity and became a mass consumer product. The food and pharmaceutical industry launched aggressive advertising campaigns presenting it as a modern and superior alternative to breast milk, associating it with progress, science and convenience. Their messaging also undermined mothers' confidence, suggesting that they might not be able to produce sufficient milk or that their milk was not nutritious enough. This advertising was often directed at medical and healthcare professionals, offering free samples and promoting products within health centres.

Despite this context, in the United States, a group of seven Catholic mothers from Illinois founded La Leche League in 1956. It became the first mother-to-mother support organisation, with the primary aim of counteracting misinformation and formula marketing. They offered peer support, provided scientific information about the benefits of breastfeeding and practical tools to overcome challenges, and worked to restore breastfeeding to its status as the natural and healthiest way to feed our babies.



Late 20th and 21st Centuries

At the end of the 20th century, breastfeeding underwent a notable shift, moving from a practice in decline to re-emerging as a public health priority. This period, spanning from the 1980s to 2000, was marked by the action of international organisations, the advocacy of support groups and a transformation in social perception.

In the 21st century, breastfeeding has become a central issue in global public health, characterised by a renewed emphasis on its promotion, the support of technology and the emergence of new challenges. Unlike in previous centuries, breastfeeding is no longer regarded solely as a biological matter, but as a human right and a fundamental pillar of maternal and child health.

The work of associations has been essential to this resurgence. Their organisation and advocacy have influenced not only public awareness, but also policies within society. Support groups and breastfeeding workshops have assisted mothers and families and have worked alongside healthcare professionals. Furthermore, in this technological era, campaigning on social media has become fundamental in continuing to advance their objectives. In the face of adverse circumstances, tools such as the internet help us remain connected.





The Near Future

In a not-so-distant future, humanity will face complex challenges related to technological development and climate change that will affect social structures. In a hyperconnected world, breastfeeding will be deeply linked to technology, potentially supported by a digital ecosystem designed to facilitate mothers' experiences.

Breastfeeding will continue to be valued not only as a public health issue, but also as a key practice for sustainability. In the face of climate-related challenges, it will stand out as an ecological alternative with low environmental impact.

Profound changes will also be required in the workplace and in social structures. Advocacy efforts concerning work–life balance, parental leave and shared responsibility in child-rearing will continue.

Education will be another fundamental pillar. Breastfeeding will form part of public health programmes and will appear in school curricula. Support associations will continue their work of assistance and outreach alongside healthcare professionals. In this way, families of the future will be sufficiently informed to make decisions without falling prey to myths or social pressures.

In an ideal future, breastfeeding will be recognised as a right of the child and will occupy public space freely, without restrictions and with full guarantees.