

MORE ON SHE-GOAT NURSES

Commenting on Longus 1. 2, where Daphnis is fondly nursed by a goat of the shepherd Lamón, W. M. Calder III¹ has cited two parallels (besides the mythological ones), from Herodotus 2. 2. 2 and from *The Story of My Life* by A. J. C. Hare, who tells of children nursed by goats in the Foundling Hospital of Florence in 1858. From the last passage, Calder argues that the custom must have been an ancient survival rather than a modern innovation: this as well as the diffusion of the custom tends to be confirmed by what we can read in old reference-books, for example, an Italian popular encyclopedia of 1842.²

Resorting to goats was especially common in emergencies, like the plague:³ the most famous literary witness is perhaps chapter 35 of the novel *I promessi sposi*, the definitive edition of which appeared in 1840–42. Alessandro Manzoni there describes the “lazzaretto” of Milan during the plague of 1630 and the nursing of babies by goats. His historical source was the work *De pestilentia* written by Cardinal Federigo Borromeo, who played a leading role in organizing assistance for the people of Milan during that terrible year. The description of the goats in the “lazzaretto,” written by the Cardinal as an eyewitness, makes interesting and charming reading: “intra claustra vero Lazareti, cum multitudini infantum haud quaquam sufficerent nutrices capraeque in id munus per prata illa haberentur, admiranda quaedam exempla charitatis pecudes etiam illae ediderunt. nam hae, audito vagitu clamoribusque infantum, accurrebant ultro submissasque mammas eis praebebant, ac si forte non poterat infans ore attingere rumam strepitu et inquietatione quadam exposcebant opem. capella etiam una praeci<p>uo sensu amoris, qui facile in bellua intelligi <non> posset, amplexa infantem neque mammas aliis ullis praebere volebat, et cum experiendi causa subtractus hic occultatusque fuisset, agnoscebat vocem vagitumque ipsius, accurrebatque et reperto eo gestiebat.”⁴ The goats’ response to the infants’ crying recalls what is told by Hare; and the love lavished by the one goat on her favorite may indeed support the view that Longus’ story is not merely a “quainter fancy.”

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1. “Longus 1. 2: The She-Goat Nurse,” *CP* 78 (1983): 50–51.

2. *Nuova enciclopedia popolare* . . . , sotto la direzione di G. Demarchi, s.v. “allattamento” I (Turin, 1842), p. 482: “Nei casi di necessità si ebbe ricorso agli animali per nutrire il bambino. In generale si preferiscono le capre per la forma dei loro capezzoli, per l’abbondanza del loro latte, come per la facilità colla quale questo animale si abitua a presentare al bambino la propria mammella, e dell’attaccamento che essa è suscettibile di contrarre per esso. In questo caso si preferisca, se si può, una capra giovane, che abbia partorito di recente e non la prima volta. Le capre bianche saranno da preferirsi perché il loro latte ha un odore meno forte” (my thanks to G. Cipriani for providing me with a copy of this book).

3. See, for instance, the passage cited by J.-N. Biraben, *Les hommes et la peste en France et dans les pays européens et méditerranéens*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1976), p. 149, from the register of the Hôtel de Ville of Grenoble under the date 8 August 1586: “On achètera des chèvres pour nourrir les petits enfants pestiférés dont les mères sont mortes.”

4. The first edition was published by A. Saba (Sora, 1932); I cite from the MS (Ambros. F 20 sup. ff. 35v–36r), with two emendations from *Federigo Borromeo: “De Pestilentia,”* testo latino e traduzione a cura di G. Mazzoli (Pavia, 1964), chap. 8, pp. 72–74. A paraphrase of the passage was already offered by G. Ripamonti, *De peste quae occurrit anno 1630* (Milan, 1641), pp. 182–83.