

## The Old Woman: Female Wisdom as a Resource and a Threat in Hittite Anatolia\*

*Gary Beckman*

A scathing estimate of the intellectual capacities of female members of the Hittite society of the Late Bronze Age is expressed by the male character Appu in a folk tale inscribed during the Hittite Empire period (fourteenth-thirteenth centuries BCE). Stung by his wife's criticism of his repeated failure to impregnate her, made all the more cutting because it has been delivered before the servants, he exclaims: "You are a woman and think like one! You know nothing at all!"<sup>1</sup> The behavior to be expected from a good wife is succinctly expressed in another contemporary tale: "A(n ideal) woman's mind is well ordered. She has renounced (lit. cut [herself] off from) giving orders. She is dependent on the authority(?) of the god. She stands in woman's obedience, and she does not disobey (her) husband's word."<sup>2</sup>

Such categorical dismissals of women's intelligence and initiative are hardly to be expected from a participant in a culture preserving strong matriarchal or matrilineal elements, as some writers have mistakenly claimed concerning Hittite Anatolia.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as a general rule, women were of political significance in Hatti only as backup carriers of the royal line, as stated in the Proclamation of King Telipinu:

Let only a prince of the first rank, a son, become king! If there is no first-rank prince, then whoever is a son of the second rank—let this one become king! If there is no prince, no (male) heir, then whoever is a first-

\* It is a privilege to contribute to a volume honoring Dr. Jana Součková-Siegelová, whose pioneering studies of Hittite mythological and folkloric texts (including the Tale of Appu mentioned immediately below) and of the administrative documents of Hatti have contributed so much to our field. Hannah Marcuson of The Oriental Institute in Chicago is currently completing a dissertation on the Hittite "Old Woman" that will treat this subject in far greater detail than this modest essay.

1 CTH 360 i 36–37, ed. Siegelová 1971: 6–7.

2 KUB 24.7 iv 49–52 (CTH 363), cf. CHD L-M: 306, s.v. *mitnaz(a)*.

3 See my skeptical discussion of this interpretation of Hittite society in Beckman 1986.

rank daughter—let them take a husband for her, and let him become king!<sup>4</sup>

Queen Puduḫepa of the early thirteenth century, who was active both in the administration of palace affairs and on the stage of international diplomacy, provides the exception that proves this dismal rule. Undoubtedly a strong personality and a capable individual,<sup>5</sup> Puduḫepa nonetheless exercised power under exceptional circumstances: Her husband Ḫattušili III was a usurper and probably relied in part for support in his claims to the throne upon Puduḫepa's family ties with the highest strata of the society of Kizzuwatna,<sup>6</sup> which was a significant component of the Empire. In addition, Ḫattušili was sickly throughout his lifetime, and probably died relatively young, leaving Puduḫepa to act as a kind of regent for their son and his successor Tudḫaliya IV. In the area of religion too, Puduḫepa went beyond the usual queenly role, making the effort to have cultic texts imported from her native Kizzuwatna consulted in connection with the performance of the *ḫišuwa*-festival in the Hittite capital.<sup>7</sup>

However, in regard to relations with para-human powers, as we shall see, women in general exercised important functions both in popular devotion and in the state cult. Remaining for the moment with the Hittite queen, she served—at least nominally—as high priestess of all the gods of Ḫatti, as her husband was—again, at least in principle—the chief priest of every deity.<sup>8</sup> This partnership is expressed visually in the unfinished rock relief at Fıraktın (Figure 3.1),<sup>9</sup> where Puduḫepa is depicted making an offering to the Sun-goddess of the city of Arinna, who despite her title was a chthonic figure, while Ḫattušili pours a libation to the Storm-god.

These two divinities stood at the head of the Hittite pantheon, just as the king and queen, symmetrically and as their deputies, led human society. Those who have claimed to find a matriarchal strand in Hittite culture have adduced as support for their argument the very prominence of the Sun-goddess beside the Storm-god as shown here. But in fact the importance of goddesses in a religious system implies little about the role of human women within the society that it serves.<sup>10</sup> Would we conclude that the traditional Roman Catholic

4 CTH 19.11 ii 36–39, ed. Hoffmann 1984: 32–33.

5 See the sketch of her career in Otten 1975.

6 For a detailed discussion on the life and health of this king, see Ünal 1974.

7 Otten 1975: 16.

8 See Taggar-Cohen 2006b: 367–83.

9 On the image of Puduḫepa on this monument, see Alexander 1977.

10 Beckman 2000: 20–22.



FIGURE 3.1 *The rock relief at Firaktin. On the right Queen Puduhepa worships the Sun-goddess.*

PHOTO BY R. TAYFUN BILGIN.

cultures of Europe harbor egalitarian values concerning the sexes on the basis of the prominence of the Virgin Mary in their spiritual ideologies?

After all, sexual reproduction, which requires the cooperation of the two genders, is basic to all complex life, and it is only to be expected that many of the deities whom polytheistic thinkers hold to be immanent in various aspects of the constantly renewing universe should be female. In Hatti the fertility of the earth was represented by the female Sun-goddess,<sup>11</sup> while the hyper-masculine Storm-god stood for the fructifying water of rainfall and of the partially underground rivers found in the karst landscape of central Anatolia.<sup>12</sup> Goddesses were also responsible for the thriving of grain, for the successful birth of humans, and for a myriad of other essential phenomena.

As shown in the extensive programs of worship so characteristic of the Hittite archives, many of the cultic servants of goddesses were women, undoubtedly because they shared with them a common gender identity.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, animal offerings to goddesses were frequently drawn from the females of the respective species—ewes, say, in preference to rams—just as dark-colored beasts were considered the most appropriate gifts for chthonic deities.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, priestesses also attended upon male divinities, for women made up at least half of the communities whose *raison d'être*, according to the Hittite worldview, was simply to supply the basic needs of their divine masters through praise, offerings, entertainment, and the production of foodstuffs for their temple establishments. If the entire community was to be involved in this enterprise, it was only appropriate that women be represented in most if not all of its phases and aspects.

<sup>11</sup> Haas 1994: 423–26.

<sup>12</sup> See Houwink ten Cate 1992 and Deighton 1982.

<sup>13</sup> On women in Hittite worship, see Taggar-Cohen 2006a and 2006b: 312–68.

<sup>14</sup> Haas 2003: 400–401.

But in the province of magic, women were not simply included in order to fill out the representation of the human world, but rather took an equal if not leading role: Of 71 individuals attested by name as authors of rituals in E. Laroche's *Catalogue des textes hittites*, 38 or 53.5% are female.<sup>15</sup> This rough numerical parity with the male magical experts is most striking. This is in accord with the preponderance of goddesses among deities of magic: Ḫannaḫanna, Išḫara, Šaušga, and Kamrušepa, all ladies, are the most important divine healers in Hittite religion.

Among references to female magical practitioners, the most common designation is the Sumerogram <sup>MUNUS</sup>ŠU.GI, 'Old Woman', which appears in at least 36 of the ritual compositions listed by Laroche. Thirteen bearers of this label are securely known by name (Table 3.1), and nineteen other ladies practicing white magic are probably also 'Old Women' (Table 3.2).

Although the writing appears in other contexts with its literal and basic meaning of 'aged female human',<sup>16</sup> and in such circumstances undoubtedly has a different Hittite reading, in most if not all religious texts it stands for Hittite *ḫašauwa*.<sup>17</sup> This Hittite term literally means not 'old woman', but rather '(she) of birth'. While we might have thought that the sense of this word is rather 'pregnant woman', as such it would mark a transitory condition and could hardly have served as a professional title. Therefore <sup>MUNUS</sup>ŠU.GI probably originally referred to another woman customarily present at parturition, namely the midwife. By the era when the majority of our Hittite texts were inscribed, however, it had become a general designation for female ritual expert, sometimes applied to a woman additionally called by another title, such as 'wet-nurse'. The linguistic and sociological association of the midwife with wider healing competences is also known from many other pre-modern cultures. Compare the French usage of the expression *sage femme* for 'midwife' alongside *accoucheuse*. In what follows, I will speak of the Old Woman only in this professional sense.

In the Hittite texts of the classical period, the midwife *per se* is called <sup>MUNUS</sup>*ḫaš(ša)nupalla*-, literally 'bringer to birth', often written with the Sumerogram <sup>MUNUS</sup>ŠÀ.ZU. Yet another expression meaning 'midwife' is <sup>MUNUS</sup>*ḫarnauwaš*, which may be rendered literally as 'woman of the birth-stool'. In a passage from one of her prayers on behalf of her ailing husband Queen Puduḫepa tells a goddess:

15 Beckman 1993: 36–37.

16 As in the descriptions of villagers in the land donation texts, for example, no. 22: 3, 15, 16, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30; see Rüster/Wilhelm 2012: 140–47.

17 On the midwife and her designations in Ḫatti, see Beckman 1983: 232–35.

Among men it is said: 'To a 'woman of the birth-stool' a deity is favorable.' I, Puduḫepa, am a 'woman of the birth-stool', (and since) I have devoted myself to your son (the Storm-god of the city of Nerik), yield to me, O Sun-goddess of Arinna, my lady! Grant to me what [I ask of you]! Grant life to [Ḫattušili], your servant! Through [the Fate-deities] and the Mother-goddesses let long years and days be given to him!<sup>18</sup>

When we examine the activities of actual midwives in the Hittite birth rituals,<sup>19</sup> we find that their duties fall into two categories. First there are the actual physical tasks involved in any birth. The midwife prepares the equipment necessary for parturition and thereafter delivers the child. Second, the midwife recites incantations on behalf of the newborn, beseeching the gods to remove evil influences and to grant a desirable fate to the child. One such speech reads, in part: "O Sun-goddess of the Earth, may you seize [(various evils)]! And further [...] you shall not let them loose (again)! But for the child continually give life, fitness, and long years!"<sup>20</sup>

The similarity of this speech to the request made by Puduḫepa on behalf of Ḫattušili in her prayer is striking: in each instance it is life and long years that are sought from the divine addressee. The significance of the queen's reference to herself as a midwife is thus apparent. The Hittites believed that the gods turned a favorable ear to the midwife when she sought a good fate for the newborn, and through her metaphor Puduḫepa strengthens her own request for vitality for the invalid king.

If the midwife displayed a special talent in securing divine favor for the neonate, then other individuals might also on occasion seek out her services. That is, it was not only the practical expertise of the Old Women in connection with birth and other medical and magical problems that accounts for the prominent place of women in the healing arts of Ḫatti, but also the particular favor with which the utterance of a midwife was thought to be received by the gods. Given the great importance of recitations in Hittite magic,<sup>21</sup> the prominence of the eloquent woman in such endeavors is hardly surprising. In the course of their ritual activities, various Old Women are found delivering incantations in all the known vernacular languages of Late Bronze Age Anatolia, but most frequently—beyond Hittite itself—in the Hurrian and Luwian idioms of the south and east.

18 KUB 21.27 ii 15–23 (CTH 384), ed. Sürenhagen 1981: 112–13.

19 Edited in Beckman 1983.

20 KBo 17.60 rev. 8'–11' (CTH 430.3.A), ed. Beckman 1983: 60–61.

21 See Beckman 1999.

An excerpt from a ritual intended to remove the malign effects of black magic upon a patient will serve to illustrate the techniques of analogic magic and the accompanying performative incantations that characterize Hittite counter-magic:

[The Old Woman holds up a clay figurine toward the sun.] Then the Old Woman speaks as follows: (O Sun-god of the Hand, here is a bewitched person. If a male has affected this person, he or she has now held (the figurine) up backwards—let him (the perpetrator) take (the baneful influences) back!) Then she holds (the figurine) up backwards (again, saying:) (But if a woman has affected him/her, then you know (about this), O Sun-god. Let it be a head-covering for her, and let her take (the baneful influences) back! Let it be a belt for her, and let her bind (the baneful influences) on herself! Let it be shoes for her, and let her put them on!|<sup>22</sup>

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But the dealings of the Old Woman with the supernatural did not end with healing. Within the ceremonies of the state cult she usually conducts the rite known as *mukeššar*, ‘evocation’,<sup>23</sup> by which a god or goddess is summoned and drawn to the site of worship along paths strewn with fruit and other food-stuffs. The <sup>MUNUS</sup>ŠU.GI was also the practitioner in charge of the performance of the bird oracles and the less well-attested snake oracles, by which the gods were believed to communicate symbolically with their human subjects by directing the movements of these animals within demarcated spaces. She also operated the obscure KIN or “lot” oracle,<sup>24</sup> which was possibly structured around the movement of tokens on a game board. Like most of their male colleagues who interpreted signs presented by the exta of sacrificial animals or those elicited by yet other techniques, the Old Women diviners remain nameless in the available records.

During the early years of the Hittite state, at least some Old Women, like the members of many other categories of religious experts, seem to have been organized in a guild associated with the royal palace. We may draw this conclusion from the appearance in older texts (or later copies of such) of expressions such as ‘Chief of the Old Women’, ‘Old Woman of the Palace’, and ‘Old Woman of the King’. I suspect that these terms refer to a college of diviners, since the performance of oracles is the only activity of the Old Woman definitely documented in Old Hittite sources.

22 CTH 402 i 12–19, ed. Jakob-Rost 1972: 22–23.

23 CHD L–M: 324–26.

24 Beal 2002: 76–80.

I conclude this survey of the Old Woman and her activities in Hatti with consideration of the well-known death-bed admonition of King Hattušili I<sup>25</sup> to a woman named Haštayar, apparently his wife or daughter, but at any rate an intimate.<sup>26</sup> Believing that he is not long for this world, the monarch instructs her concerning her behavior in the future. The relevant passage, which is a bit convoluted, jumping between narrative and quotation, reads:

The Great King, Labarna, says repeatedly to Haštayar: 'Don't forsake me!' (In order that) the king not (have to) speak thus to her, the courtiers say to him as follows: 'She still now keeps on consulting the Old Women.' The king says as follows [to them]: 'Is she still now consulting the Old Women? I don't know.' (And the king says to Haštayar:) 'Furthermore, don't forsake me! [No!] Always consult me [alone]. I will reveal my words to you. Wash me as is fitting, hold me to your breast, and at your breast protect me from the earth!'<sup>27</sup>

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In addition to performing the funerary rites on his behalf—for this is the significance of the plea to shield him from the earth or underworld—Hattušili here forbids Haštayar to make use of the services of the <sup>MUNUS</sup>ŠU.GI. In light of what we have observed about the expertise of the Old Women, one might surmise that the king is cautioning her to avoid entanglement in maleficent rites—since anyone proficient in healing magic can go over to the dark side simply by reversing the direction of the occult procedures with which she is familiar. Rather than being objects of contempt like Appu's wife, these women could prove to be downright dangerous!

This interpretation, however, is unlikely in the present context, both because ritual activities by the Old Woman are not securely attested for this early period, and more significantly since the Akkadian verb employed here in connection with the services of the Old Women is *ša'ālu*, a term that routinely refers to investigation by means of an oracle.<sup>28</sup> But why would divination be of such concern to the monarch, if it was so legitimate a practice as to be institutionalized within the state religious bureaucracy?

To answer this question, we must take into consideration the historical situation within which the king issued his testament.<sup>29</sup> Throughout his reign he

25 The text in question is a Hittite-Akkadian bilingual.

26 See de Martino 1989.

27 CTH 6 iii–iv 64–73, ed. Sommer/Falkenstein 1938: 16–17.

28 CAD Š/I: 278. The Hittite-language version employs *punušš-*.

29 On the disharmony within the royal family at this time, see Klengel 1999: 55–59.

had been confronted with factional strife among the members of his family, with conspiracies hatched among the ranks of his courtiers, and even with open revolt by his designated heirs. Indeed, the primary burden of the proclamation is to settle the matter of succession once and for all, and to bind the nobility to assure that Ḫattušili's wishes in this regard be honored. We can well imagine that the parties involved in the preceding internecine struggles within the court at Ḫattuša had on occasion turned to divination to gauge their chances for success.

Therefore, I believe that Ḫattušili anticipated the action of Augustus Caesar, who in 29 BCE outlawed divinatory inquiry about the intentions of the gods toward the Roman polity (*augurium salutis*).<sup>30</sup> The Hittite monarch likewise sought to prohibit the exercise of prognostication concerning the fortunes of the state, in order to strip potential conspirators of a tool for mobilizing faction. Far from knowing “nothing at all”, the Old Women rather possessed knowledge and competences dangerous to the very stability of the fledgling Hittite polity.

TABLE 3.1 *Named* *MUNUSŠU.GI*

Allaituraḫḫi	Mallidunna
Alli	Maštigga
Annanna	Paškuwatti
Anniwiyani	Šilalluḫi
Ḫebattarakki	Šušumanniga
Kueša	Tunnawiya
Malli	

TABLE 3.2 *Probable* *MUNUSŠU.GI*

Ayatarša	Kali	Tiwiyani
Ambazzi	Kuranna	Ummaya
Anna	Kururu	Uruwanda
Ḫantitaššu	Nikaluzzi	Wattiti
Ḫatiya	Ninalla	Zuwi
Ḫuntaritta	Belazzi	.NÍG.GA.GUŠKIN
IR-mimma		

30 Dalla Rosa 2011: 243.



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