

WOMEN IN ANTIQUITY

Real women across the Ancient World

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BIRTH AND MOTHERHOOD AMONG THE HITTITES

Gary Beckman

Sexuality and procreation

Sexual reproduction is fundamental for most beings in our world, a fact that was well recognized by the Hittites of Late Bronze Age Anatolia. Human propagation, while of primary concern to the community, was simply one aspect of the general fertility of the cosmos. This perspective may be recognized in a mythological narrative in which a deity becomes angry and abandons his sphere of responsibility, with the result that the universe literally seizes up:

Mist seized the windows. Smoke seized the house. On the hearth the logs were stifled. [On the altars] the gods were stifled. In the fold the sheep were stifled. In the corral the cows were stifled. The sheep refused her lamb. The cow refused her calf.

(The god) Telipinu went off and took away grain, the fertility of the herds, growth(?), plenty(?), and satiety into the wilderness, to the meadow and the moor. Telipinu proceeded to disappear into the moor. The *halenzu*-plant spread over him. Barley and wheat no longer grow. Cows, sheep, and humans no longer conceive, and those who are (already) pregnant do not give birth in this time.¹

Only after the god's anger has been appeased and he himself has been pacified, do conditions return to normal:

Telipinu came back home and concerned himself for his land. The mist released the window. The smoke released the house. The altars were reconciled with the gods. The hearth released the log. In the fold he (Telipinu) released the sheep. In the corral he released the cows. Then the mother tended her child. The sheep tended her lamb. The cow tended her calf. And Telipinu <tended> the king and queen. He concerned himself for them in regard to life, vigor, and future (existence).²

Note also the inclusion of human fertility among other miscellaneous aspects of fecundity requested in a prayer addressed to this same Telipinu:

Give to the king, queen, princes, and to (all) the land of Ḫatti life, health, strength, long years, and joy (in) the future! [Also] give [them] future thriving of grain, vines, fruit, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, mules (sic), asses—together with that of wild animals—and of human beings!³

Nonetheless, the desire to produce their own progeny and thereby assure the continuation of their particular lines of descent was a major concern for the men and women of Ḫatti. In a ritual, the gods are urged to bless the royal family:

And provide the king and queen with life, health, long years and children—male children and female children, to the first and second generations—and for the male (offspring) (provide) manliness and valor, and for the female (offspring) womanliness and motherhood!⁴

The failure to beget or deliver a child, particularly a male heir, was a cause of acute embarrassment. In a folk tale we read of the sad lot of an otherwise prosperous citizen named Appu:

And he lacks nothing; only one thing does he lack—he has neither a son nor a daughter. (When) the elders of (his town) Šudul sit before him to eat, and this one gives bread and meat to (his) son, while [that] one gives something to drink to (his) son, Appu has no one to whom to give bread.⁵

Since this text is a *Märchen*, Appu's problem is soon remedied through divine intervention, which allows his wife to present him with two boys in succession.

The threat of childlessness is included among the sanctions intended to enforce loyalty to the crown in an oath of allegiance administered to Hittite troops:

Whoever should transgress these oaths by undertaking evil against the king and queen or against the royal princes—let the oaths of the gods on that account likewise destroy his future! Let his wife bear neither male nor female children!⁶

Given this concern for offspring, it is not surprising that much of the respect accorded women in Hittite society can be traced back in one way or another to their role in carrying and delivering the next generation, or to their expertise in assisting in this process as midwives (on whom see below).⁷

In my dissertation (Beckman 1977) and its later published revision (Beckman 1983),⁸ I have treated all aspects of birth in Hittite culture. In this volume dedicated to women in the ancient world, I will concentrate on the experience of Hittite women in conceiving children, carrying them to term, and giving birth, rather than on the larger topic of fertility in the cosmos.

But first a word about the character of Hittite civilization. Despite the fact that the Hittite language and its sister tongues in the Anatolian branch constitute the earliest attested members of the Indo-European language family, the culture of Ḫatti had relatively little in common with the religion and life-ways of early India, Ireland, or of the Classical world of Greece and Rome. Rather, Hittite civilization arose from the synthesis of inherited Indo-European elements with beliefs, social practices, institutions, and technologies borrowed from their indigenous Hattic predecessors in central Anatolia, from the Hurrian polities of northern Syria and Cilicia, and above all from the high culture of Mesopotamia—Sumer, Babylonia, and Assyria.

Birth and motherhood among the Hittites

Indeed, Ḫatti is most appropriately considered a peripheral cuneiform civilization, like those of pre-Hellenistic northern Syria and southwestern Iran.⁹

In particular, this cultural diversity is apparent in regard to birth practices, for we have recovered from the Hittite capital more than 20 individual Hittite-language rituals concerned with parturition¹⁰ as well as a sizable body of incantations relative to these matters in the Luwian tongue.¹¹ A number of the ceremonies had been imported from Cilicia/Hittite Kizzuwatna,¹² while others reflect native central Anatolian traditions.¹³ Some of the provisions in these regimens are mutually exclusive, so that they cannot all have been followed in any particular instance. Their presence in the royal archives is probably to be explained as the result of a survey conducted by the king's scribes of gynecological practices throughout the realm, with the aim of assuring that the combined wisdom of all practitioners subject to the monarch be available, if necessary, for the treatment of the queen and other members of the royal family.

Becoming pregnant

We have already established that failure to produce offspring was such an undesirable condition that it was invoked to frighten soldiers into obedience. This threat was also made in treaties between the Hittite Great King and his vassals. Here is an example, excerpted from the accord between Šuppiluliuma I of Ḫatti and his son-in-law, Šattiwaza of the rump Hurrian state of Mitanni:

(The gods) shall stand and be witnesses to these words of the treaty. If you, Prince Šattiwaza, and you Hurrians do not observe the words of this treaty, the gods, lords of the oath, shall destroy you and you Hurrians, together with your land, your wives, and your possessions. They will draw you out like malt from its husk. As one does not get a plant from the midst of . . . so you, together with any other wife whom you might take (in addition to my daughter), and you Hurrians, together with your wives, your sons, and your lands shall thus have no progeny.¹⁴

But an individual might experience reproductive difficulties even if he or she had not deservedly attracted the malign attentions of the para-human world. The ritual attributed to the Old Woman¹⁵ Tunnawiya was intended to remove impurity (*papratar*¹⁶) that was thought to block successful generation of children. It was to be performed:

[i]f a person, either a man or a woman, should find him-/herself in some impurity, or if someone else has (through sorcery) named him/her for impurity, (so that) either a woman's children keep dying, or she continually aborts, or if the sexual organs of a man or a woman are disabled in consequence of a polluting spell.¹⁷

Or the problem might lie squarely upon the male partner, as in the rite credited to the Arzawan woman, Paškuwatti, to be carried out "if some man has no capacity for reproduction (*ḫaššatar*) or is not a man in regard to women."¹⁸ In the course of this ceremony, the magician addresses the goddess Uliliyašši:

Allot to (the patient) your servant girl and he will become a yoke (for her). Let him take his wife and produce for himself male and female children! They will be your servants and servant girls.¹⁹

The success of the procedure is to be judged through incubation. The client spends the night in the deity's shrine in the hope that she will have sexual intercourse with him in his dreams.

Our sources provide next to no information about medical treatments for female infertility in ancient Anatolia, but the primitive state of Hittite gynecological knowledge is hinted at by the following passage from an Akkadian-language letter sent by Pharaoh Ramses II in reply to a request by his colleague, Ḫattusili III of Ḫatti:

Say to my brother: That which my brother wrote [to me concerning] his [sister] Matanazzi: "Let my brother send a man to prepare medicines for her, so that she might be caused to give birth." That is what my brother wrote to me.

Say to my brother: Now, I, the king, your brother, know about Matanazzi, my brother's sister. She is said to be fifty or sixty years old. It is not possible to prepare medicines for a woman who has completed fifty or sixty years so that she might still be caused to give birth.

O that the Sun-god and the Storm-god might command, so that the ritual that will be performed will be carried out fully for my brother's sister!

And I, the king, your brother, shall send a competent incantation priest and a competent [physician], and they will prepare medicines for her in order that she might give birth.²⁰

As was the case elsewhere in the ancient world, conception in Ḫatti was closely associated with the moon and its immanent deity (Hitt. *Arma*).²¹ The denominative verb "to (be)come pregnant," *armāi-*, means literally "to be in a lunar way"; the factitive *armahḫ-* is "to make pregnant, impregnate," and with the reflexive particle *-za* indicates "to become pregnant."²² The relevant adjectives are *armant-*, *armawant-*, and *armahḫuwant-*, all "pregnant, gravid," used of both humans and animals.²³

Being pregnant²⁴

The entering of a woman into the state of pregnancy could be celebrated by a special festival performed in honor of the Mother-goddesses. Over the course of her term, monthly rites might be carried out for these same deities, and the mother-to-be herself was subject to certain restrictions in her diet and sexual activities. Periodically, pregnancy offerings and purifications were made, and after a certain point, the woman could be sequestered from her family for the balance of her pregnancy. Nonetheless, it seems that most deliveries occurred in the home.

Prior to parturition, an oracle might be sought to determine if the mother was in the proper spiritual condition to give birth successfully, and offerings could be performed to correct her situation in the event that this inquiry yielded a disturbing result. Finally, there were rites to prepare the woman's possessions, the birth apparatus, and the woman herself for the act of delivery. As for the physical integrity of a gravid woman and her child, the Hittite Laws record:

If anyone causes a free woman to miscarry, if it is her tenth month,²⁵ he/she will pay ten shekels of silver; if it is her fifth month, he/she will pay five shekels of silver.²⁶

That is, the fine was prorated according to how long the pregnancy had progressed at the time of the miscarriage. Since this paragraph follows directly upon a series of laws concerned with bodily violence, it is safe to conclude that it deals with the effects of an assault on the woman's person rather than with a case of abortion.

Giving birth

A single Hittite verb was used to express the process of sexual reproduction in regard to both biological genders, whether human or animal: said of a female, *ḥa(š)š-* means “to give birth”; if the subject is a male the term should be rendered “to engender.” The abstract *ḥaššatar* indicates “procreation; giving birth,” and the causative *ḥaššamu-*, “to bring to birth,” is employed of midwives in relation to a newborn whose entry into the world they have facilitated.²⁷

Birth rituals as well as descriptions of accouchements in mythological narratives indicate that the mother did not face the ordeal of delivery alone, but was aided by more experienced members of her sex, generically referred to as ^{MUNUS}*ḥašauwa-*, “(she) of birth.”²⁸ 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, as it does elsewhere in Hittite records. Therefore it 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.”

In the Hittite texts of the empire period (fourteenth to thirteenth century BCE), the more specific word for midwife is ^{MUNUS}*ḥaš(ša)mipalla-*, literally “bringer to birth,” often written with the Sumerogram ^{MUNUS}ŠA.ZU. Yet another expression meaning “midwife” is ^{MUNUS}*ḥarmauwaš*, which may be rendered literally as “woman of the birth-stool.” In a passage from a prayer on behalf of her ailing husband, King Ḫattušili III, Queen Puduḥepa tells a goddess:

Among men it is said: “To a ‘woman of the birth-stool’ a deity is favorable.” I, Puduḥepa, 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.²⁹

When we examine the activities of actual midwives in the Hittite birth rituals,³⁰ we find that their duties fall into two categories. First, there are the actual physical tasks involved in any birth. The midwife prepares the necessary equipment, attends and comforts the mother, and delivers the child, cleansing the mouth first of all.³¹ Second, the practitioner recites incantations on behalf of the newborn and the mother, both during the course of her labor³² and after the infant has emerged. For example, the technique of analogy so frequent in Hittite magic³³ is employed in this spell in which the lifespan of the baby is compared to the permanence of a royal mausoleum:

And come! [As] the wind and rain cannot [lift] the rock sanctuary [from] its place—because he/she was born in this house—likewise let [not] an evil thing lift [his/her life] from its place! And let it likewise be protected! And let it be alive for eternity!³⁴

The similarity of this speech to the request made by Puduḥepa on behalf of Ḫattušili in her prayer quoted just above 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, Puduḥepa strengthens her own request for vitality for the invalid king.

Also of note is the well-known historiola, “The Cow of the Moon-god (Sin),”³⁵ included in a birth-ritual of Hurrian origin.³⁶ The recitation of this narrative, in which the lunar deity dispatches heavenly beings to ease the travail of a cow which he himself had impregnated, was intended to serve as a cosmic template for the relief of the human parturient.

Males, including the “physician” (^{LJ}A.ZU) and the *patili*-priest,³⁷ might also be present during birth, but their duties included no gynecological matters, only the performance of offerings and recitations and general housekeeping. There is no mention in Hittite sources of the participation of the husband during the actual delivery of his child, although several literary texts demonstrate that soon thereafter he acknowledged his paternity by dandling the baby on his knees and bestowing a name upon it.³⁸

On the divine level, responsibility for overseeing each human birth fell to the Birth-deities or Mother-goddesses, who are usually designated by the Sumerogram DINGIR.MAH.MEŠ/ĤI.A, to be read in Hittite sometimes as *Ĥannaĥanna*,³⁹ other times as *Kunuštalleš*.⁴⁰ As far as our sources indicate, these divinities seem to have taken little or no part in the actual delivery, beyond lending their benevolent presence.

The Mother-goddesses were accompanied by the para-human beings who inscribed or determined an individual’s fate (Hitt. *gulšuwar*), an undifferentiated collegium of uncertain number, who took their name from the same root: ⁴*Gulšeš*.⁴¹ We may refer to them simply as the Fate-deities.⁴² By the time of the writing of our texts, the two groups of divinities had become so closely identified due to their shared activity that they had been largely conflated.⁴³ A major complex of rituals is dedicated to the joint worship of these two divine bodies.⁴⁴ In any event, there can be little doubt that the Fate-deities, like the Mother-goddesses, were held to be female. Their Hurrian counterparts were the *Ĥudena Ĥudellura*, likewise goddesses.

A good illustration of the responsibilities of these deities around a birth is provided by an incantation in which both groups are addressed:

In regard to this matter we have just now summoned as witnesses the Mother-goddesses and the Fate-deities. [And], if a person is born at a certain time, [then] as the Fate-deities and [the Mother-goddesses] on that day designate well-being for him/her—now this is that day! May you, O Fate-deities and [Mother-goddesses], today designate life, [joy], strength, long years (and numerous other boons) for the king (and) queen!⁴⁵

This retrospective reference to the blessing of the newborn is occasioned by the desire that the Fates and the Birth-deities, at least one of whom seems to have watched over an individual later in life, intervene in order to help adults. We have already seen several examples of incantations directed to them or to para-human forces in general during parturition and its following moments.

Little in the way of equipment was required for a birth in *Ĥatti*. One ritual simply calls for several pieces of ordinary household furnishings: two stools, three cushions, and a blanket. The delivering mother was settled on the padded stools, while the third bolster was placed on the ground between them awaiting the emerging baby. The midwife held the blanket to catch the infant.⁴⁶

Other rites mention a specialized implement, the ^{GIŠ}*ĥarnau*-, “birth-stool,” which was composed of a platter (^{DU}G^DĪLIM.GAL) and pegs (^{GIŠ}KAK).⁴⁷ Presumably, the parturient arranged her buttocks in the ceramic receptacle and grasped the pegs during her travail.

However, most Hittite texts treating birth do not discuss the technical aspects of parturition in any detail,⁴⁸ either because these were common knowledge, or alternatively because they

Birth and motherhood among the Hittites

belonged to the arcane lore of the Old Women. There is no evidence for the use of special birth-bricks known elsewhere throughout the pre-modern Near East.⁴⁹

Special ceremonies might be carried out to introduce the newborn and to reintegrate the new mother into the community. One source tells us that the birth of a child was commemorated by a *mala*-offering on the seventh day of his/her life, and that the infant was ritually cleansed at the beginning of the third month if a boy, or of the fourth in the case of a girl.⁵⁰

Motherhood and children

Naturally, reciprocal affection between parents and their children was assumed in Hittite society. When a Hittite-language text describes the favorable treatment experienced by the population of a city conquered by the early Anatolian ruler, Anitta, it says that he “treated them as (his) mothers (*annuš*) and fathers (*attuš*).”⁵¹ And recall that Queen Puduḫepa supports her plea to the Sun-goddess that we considered earlier in this essay with a reminder that she had performed outstanding services for the deity’s beloved son, the Storm-god of Nerik.

Nonetheless, in the Hittite Laws, children were basically treated as a type of property, and when partners of equal social status divorced, the male walked off with the greater portion of the children.⁵² As for the question of legitimacy,⁵³ we have evidence only in regard to the royal family, among whom the Proclamation of King Telipinu distinguishes between the ruler’s sons and daughters begotten on the queen, and his offspring produced with concubines.⁵⁴

List of abbreviations

CTH refers to entries in Laroche 1971, as updated by the Konkordanz der hethitischen Keilschrifttafeln (<http://www.hethport.uni-wuerzburg.de/hetkonk/>). Abbreviations of primary publications of cuneiform texts are those of the *Chicago Hittite Dictionary* (Chicago, IL: The Oriental Institute, 1980—date) (abbr. *CHD*). Note also *HED* = J. Puhvel. *Hittite Etymological Dictionary*, Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 1984—date. Online at <http://www.degruyter.com/view/serial/16389>.

Notes

- 1 KUB 17.10 (CTH 324) i 5’–15’. I have translated the entire text at Beckman 1997.
- 2 KUB 17.10 (CTH 324) iv 20–26.
- 3 KUB 24.2 (CTH 377) rev. 12’–16’.
- 4 KUB 14.34 (CTH 483) ii 17–19.
- 5 CTH 360 i 15–21, combined text established by Siegelová 1971: 4.
- 6 KBo 6.34 (CTH 427) ii 34–39, ed. Størenhagen 1976.
- 7 See Beckman forthcoming b.
- 8 See also Pringle 1983 and Mouton 2008.
- 9 For more on the multicultural civilization of the Hittites, see Bryce 2005: 8–20.
- 10 Edited in Beckman 1977, 1983.
- 11 Starke 1985: 202–257.
- 12 Mouton 2008.
- 13 E.g., KUB 30.29 (CTH 430.1), KBo 17.60 (CTH 430.3.A), and KUB 33.67 (CTH 333.A).
- 14 KBo 1.1 (CTH 51) rev. 58–63. A full translation of this text is found in Beckman 1999a: 42–48.
- 15 On this title for a magical practitioner, see Beckman forthcoming a.
- 16 On this quasi-substance, see *CHD* P: 103–106.
- 17 KUB 7.53 (CTH 409) i 4–6, ed. Goetze 1938: 4–5.
- 18 KUB 9.27 (CTH 406) i 1–3, ed. Hoffner 1987: 271, 277. Miller 2010 suggests that the issue here is the patient’s homosexuality. For another rite possibly intended to counter same-sex preference in a male, see Peled 2010 on CTH 393.

- 19 KUB 7.8 (CTH 406) ii 7–10, ed. Hoffner 1987: 273, 278–279.
- 20 KBo 28.30 (CTH 163) obv. 8–rev. 13, translated fully in Beckman 1999a: 137–138.
- 21 See Theuer 2000: 116–120, 185–197.
- 22 For this family of words see *HED* 1–2: 155–157.
- 23 For the rare non-cognate synonym *arnuwant-*, perhaps literally “made high/swollen; pregnant,” see Hoffner 1997: 194.
- 24 Most of this section is adapted from Beckman 1983: 250, where I gather the relevant data from all of the rituals edited in that volume. Please go there for textual references.
- 25 By the Hittite way of reckoning, the woman gave birth *in* the tenth month, rather than *after* nine.
- 26 §17, ed. Hoffner 1997: 28–29. Cf. *The Laws of Hammurapi*, §§209–14, tr. Roth 1995: 122–123.
- 27 For these words and related vocabulary, see *HED* 3: 212–118.
- 28 For the argument that this is the Hittite reading of the Sumerogram MUNUŠŠU.GI in ritual contexts, see Beckman 1983: 232–233 and forthcoming a.
- 29 KUB 21.27 ii 15–23 (CTH 384), ed. Sørenhagen 1981: 112–113.
- 30 See Beckman 1983: 232–235.
- 31 KBo 17.61 (CTH 430.2) obv. 13–15, ed. Beckman 1983: 42–43.
- 32 Note KBo 12. 112 (CTH 470) rev. 11’–13’, ed. Beckman 1983: 68–69: “As the door turns [in the socket], let the child [likewise] turn [in] his/her mother!”
- 33 See Beckman 1999b.
- 34 KBo 17.62 + 63 (CTH 478) iv 7’–12’, ed. Beckman 1983: 34–35.
- 35 See Veldhuis 1991.
- 36 KUB 44.4 (CTH 520) i 1–17, ed. Beckman 1983: 176–177.
- 37 Beckman 1983: 235–238.
- 38 See Hoffner 1968.
- 39 Beckman 1983: 239–242.
- 40 See Haas 1994: 372.
- 41 See Melchert 2015.
- 42 For a detailed discussion, see Archi 2013.
- 43 See Beckman 1983: 238–248.
- 44 CTH 434.
- 45 KUB 43.55 (CTH 448) ii 11–21; for transliterations see Beckman 1983: 244–45, Haas 1988: 90–91, and Taracha 2000: 58–61.
- 46 KUB 30.29 (CTH 430.1) obv. 1–7, ed. Beckman 1983: 22–23.
- 47 Beckman 1983: 102–104.
- 48 For contemporary practices, see Scurlock 1991; Biggs 2000; Stol 2000; Volk 2004; Böck 2013; Couto-Ferreira 2014.
- 49 See Stol 2000: 117–122; Töpfer 2014: 327–332.
- 50 KBo 17.65 (CTH 489.A) obv. 27–36, ed. Beckman 1983: 134–137.
- 51 KBo 3.22 (CTH 1) obv. 9, ed. Neu 1974, 10–11.
- 52 §31, ed. Hoffner 1997: 40–41.
- 53 On practices of inheritance and adoption, see Beckman 1996; cf. Lebrun 1979; Imparati 1995; Klock-Fontanille 2014.
- 54 CTH 19 ii 36–39, combined text established by Hoffmann 1984: 32–33. In Hatti only the monarch seems to have had multiple legitimate sexual partners.

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Gary Beckman

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