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# The Role of the Midwife in Hapsburg Spain

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# The Role of the Midwife in Hapsburg, Spain

A woman's cardinal role of power over health and royal succession in a patriarchal hierarchy.

Grace Jones



## Hapsburg Lineage and Inbreeding

- ❖ Head of the Holy Roman Empire from 1438-1740, holding territories in the Americas, East Indies, Spain, France, Germany, Portugal, and other countries.
- ❖ Preservation of the bloodline and political marriage resulted in inbreeding practices.



Portrait of Countess Livia da Porto Thiene and her Daughter Deidamia

- ❖ The presence of a marten's head and the gold chain around her waist signify fertility.
- ❖ Reproduction was a key role of the queen and royal women.
- ❖ Hapsburg women were educated and displayed as the ideal for women in the Early Modern Era.
  - The graceful and safe delivery of heirs was a key point in the public identity.

## The Makings of a Hapsburg Midwife

- ❖ The formal, social, and religious teachings for women mandated a passive demeanor but the midwife held one of power.
  - "...but in a woman, no one requires eloquence or talent or wisdom or professional skills..." (Vives)
- ❖ Most births in the Hapsburg court were irregular due to inbreeding, often more than one midwife was on site.
- ❖ Midwife was aid in birthing but also versed in pre and post-natal care, mental health care, and confirmation of an heir's legitimacy though a physician was often present toward the end of labor.
- ❖ The Protestant Reformation brought with it religious strain and the midwife's ability to baptize newborns was heightened from a common practice to a statement of power.
- ❖ A male doctor or midwife was often only called in case of emergency or complication yet became a staple in birthing chambers.
- ❖ Invention of the printing press made information and notes on midwifery more visible and public. Literature on the deformities and complications in Habsburg children was now a part of the family's relationship with the public.
  - Much of the midwife knowledge originally spread through other midwives and experience, could now be streamlined and studied.

"The midwife's prominent position in ... paintings points to her leadership in everything that takes place in the birthing chamber, as she oversaw and directed the actions of the women who assisted her throughout the delivery." (Cruz)



El nacimiento de la Virgen, by Juan Pantoja de la Cruz

- ❖ Painting of the birth of the Catholic Virgin, commissioned by Margarita of Austria in anticipation of her son Philip.
- ❖ Maria Anna of Bavaria, mother of Margarita and the midwife's assistants are replaced with Margarita's sisters.
  - Exemplifies the power the midwife holds over the birthing chamber.
  - Midwife's view on the infant rather than the viewer.
  - Lack of men in the birthing chamber reflects the hopes for an easy birth and the security a female midwife brings to the birthing chamber.

## Reformation's Effect on Midwifery

- ❖ The Reformation and the end of the Hapsburg empire brought about increased religious counterculture.
  - Increased importance in scientific development over practiced history.
  - Religious importance in birthing traditions became less prevalent.
- ❖ Class and sex barriers arose with the need for formal education and the existing class ties to practice
  - "as time went on midwives were increasingly criticized and scrutinized by male medical practitioners for their lack of proper training and professionalism. Given the diversity in training and knowledge, the quality of care provided by the midwives varied widely." (Whaley)
- ❖ Controversy over the sexes in midwifery led to corruption of male practitioners.
- ❖ Midwives often had to be examined by a physician in order to practice.
- ❖ Midwife knowledge that contradicted formal teachings faced witchcraft accusations.
- ❖ Development of tools such as forceps and pain management methods made the midwife's knowledge of complicated births less crucial.



Isabella of Parma's confinement, by Maria Christina

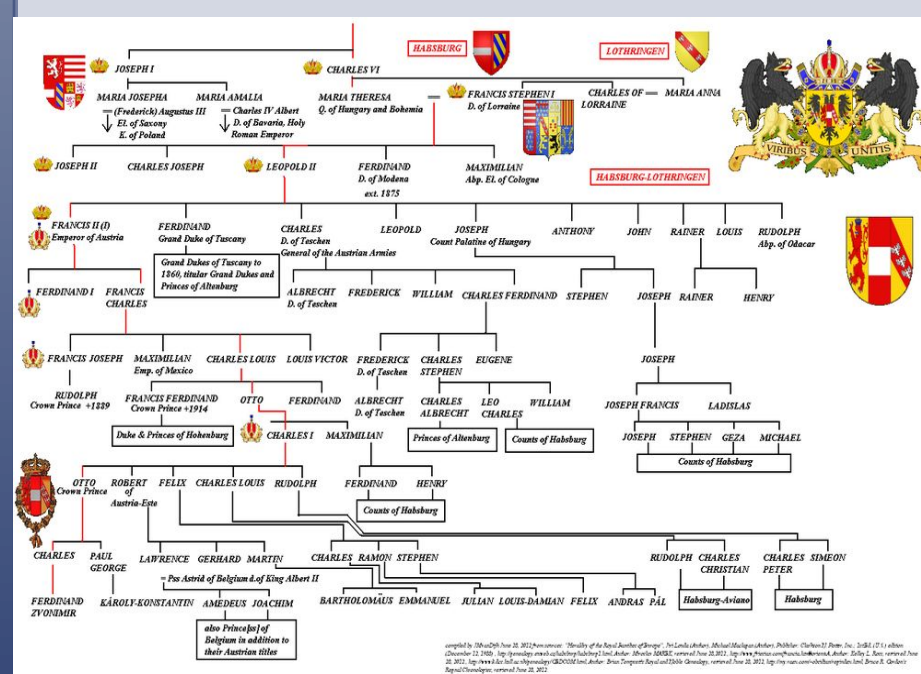
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King/Queen	F	Total number of pregnancies	Miscarriages and stillbirths	Neonatal deaths	Deaths between month 1 and year 10	Survivals at age 10	Survival to 10 years (all pre- and postnatal losses included)	Survival to 10 years (miscarriages, stillbirths and neonatal deaths not included)
Ferdinand of Aragon								
Elizabeth of Castile	0.039	7	2	0	0	5	0.714	1.000
Philip I								
Joanna I	0.037	6	0	0	0	6	1.000	1.000
Charles I								
Isabella of Portugal	0.123	7	1	1	2	3	0.429	0.600
Philip II								
Elizabeth of Valois	0.008	4	1	1	0	2	0.500	1.000
Anna of Austria	0.218	6	1	0	4	1	0.167	0.200
Philip III								
Margaret of Austria	0.115	8	0	0	3	5	0.625	0.625
Philip IV								
Elizabeth of Bourbon	0.050	7	0	3	2	2	0.286	0.500
Mariana of Austria	0.254	6	0	1	3	2	0.333	0.400

This study by Gonzalo Alvarez was performed by tracing the inbreeding coefficient (F) through 16 generations of Hapsburgs. The table above depicts the statistics on child mortality in correlation to the level of inbred genetics of the parent.

- ❖ This research shows the importance of a skilled midwife in the Hapsburg court specifically.
- ❖ Midwives were rarely charged as the cause of infant death, this chart identifying the causes of death can outline more clearly the link to inbreeding-related health issues



License to practice Midwifery 1689

