

“The Holy Brick of Birth-giving”: A Reassessment of Ancient Near Eastern Birth Bricks and Their Medical Role in Delivery

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ABSTRACT

The bricks of birth are often described as a birthing tool in ancient Near Eastern societies. Assertions about their function and usage are based almost solely on two sources: ancient religious texts and ethnographic studies. However, upon closer investigation, the religious texts suggest that the bricks were primarily ritual implements, and the ethnographic studies cited only briefly allude to the possible use of bricks prior to delivery.

In order to assess the likelihood that birth bricks were used as a medical aid during labor, this project evaluates the available textual and archaeological sources, the central terminology, and commonly-cited ethnographic studies. The project then makes suggestions about the actual functionality of the bricks based on modern clinical studies and analysis of the aforementioned sources. The research suggests that bricks may have served a ritual function during birth in the ancient Near East, but are unlikely to have played a functional or medical role during delivery.

I. TEXTUAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES

The bulk of the material describing birth bricks is comprised by religious or mythological texts from Near Eastern cultures (Fig. 1), in most cases written, codified, and preserved by an elite class of male scribes who may have had very limited knowledge of birth rituals. Of these texts, some sources are separated in time by almost a millennium from each other. In most scholarship, texts from multiple cultures and time periods are mixed together in order to generate a so-called “typical” use for birth bricks that does not consider regional or chronological specificity (Table 1).

There are far fewer archaeological finds, though their impact is skewed in the literature towards an almost equal standing with the religious texts. Most prominent is the only possible example of a birth brick (Fig. 2) and images of birthing supports in Egypt (Fig. 3).

There is no mention of birth bricks in any medical collections from Egypt or Mesopotamia. Even if birth bricks were the purview of the midwife rather than magico-medical professionals, the absence of bricks from the copious list of magico-medical texts describing birth in these cultures is puzzling.

Based on these relatively meager data, scholars have constructed how the bricks were used. Most describe a woman standing or kneeling on multiple bricks during delivery (Fig. 4) (e.g., Wegner, 2009; Roth & Roehrig, 2002; Kilmer, 1987).



Fig. 1: Map of the cultures where birth bricks are mentioned

Region	Source	Time Period
Egypt	Papyrus Westcar	2500 BCE
	Hymn to Khnum	Roman Period (30 BCE – 461 CE)
	Steal Turin no. 50058	New Kingdom Period (c. 1550-1085 BCE)
	Abydos birth brick	Late 13 th Dynasty (c. 1700-1650 BCE)
Mesopotamia	Dendera relief	Late Ptolemaic Period (c. 305-30 BCE)
	Atra-ḫasis	17 th century BCE
Israel	Enki and the World Order	2500 BCE
	Exodus 1:16	6 th /5 th century BCE

Table 1: Archaeological finds and primary texts in which birth bricks may be mentioned

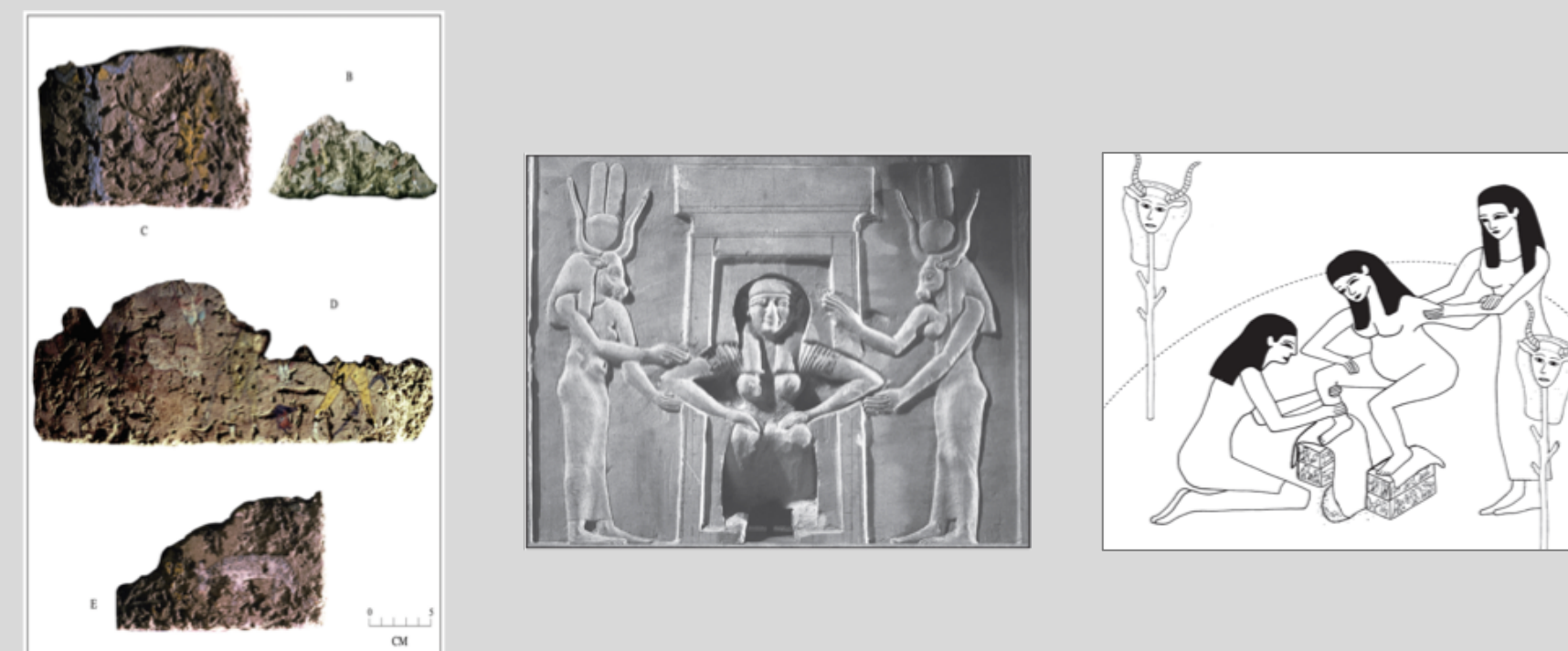


Fig. 2 (left): Possible birth brick from Abydos; Fig. 3 (middle): Birth scene at the Dendera Temple; Fig. 4 (right): Reconstructed use of the bricks (after Wegner, 2009)

II. CENTRAL TERMINOLOGY

There is a lack of scholarly consensus in the translations of “brick(s)” in the ancient texts, especially whether the terms refer to a single or multiple bricks (Table 2). In some cases the definition of a term is unclear or based on the iconography of the related hieroglyph (Fig. 5).

If a single brick is the correct translation, it would be difficult for women to utilize it for squatting or even standing during labor. If multiple bricks were employed, their use during parturition is more plausible.

Region	Terminology
Egypt	<i>ḫfd m dbt</i>
	<i>Meskhent (mshnt)</i>
Mesopotamia	<i>sig4-tu-tu-ku</i>
	<i>libittu</i>
Israel	<i>'obnayim</i>

Table 2: Terms translated as “birth brick/s” from ancient Near Eastern literature

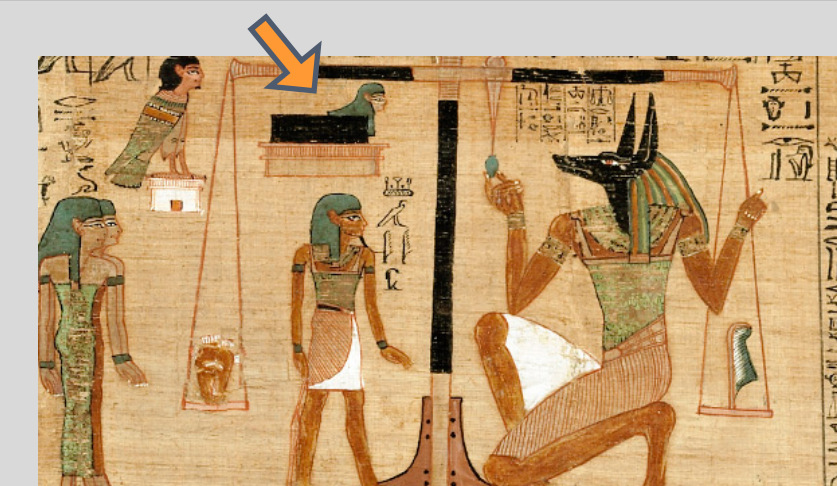


Fig. 5: Depiction of Meskhent in the Book of the Dead Chapter 125 from the papyrus of Anhai

III. ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES

In the absence of historical data, scholars rely heavily on ethnographic studies to reconstruct the function of birth bricks. Unfortunately, numerous problems arise.

- Most scholars cite only three ethnographic studies from modern Persia and three from Egypt. The summaries of these studies that appear repeatedly throughout the literature magnify their impact (e.g., Engelmann, 1884; Wegner, 2009; Stol, 2000).
- Rather than describing the single position that appears in scholarly reconstructions, the case examples include numerous positions, such as sitting (Morsy, 1982), squatting (Winkler, 1936), or standing (Häntzsche, 1864) on bricks and at different times during the labor and delivery process.
- These studies often include observations or stories about other birth practices in which no bricks or blocks are mentioned, calling into question whether such practices were widespread in the regions of origin (Morsy, 1982).
- These studies are from millennia after the time period of interest, calling into question their applicability for the ancient Near East.
- The origins of these studies and the nature of the observations described are deeply problematic. Many accounts are inconsistent regarding when the bricks are actually utilized, and many, including some of the most frequently cited, were generated from informants or travelers rather than first-hand observers (Ploss, 1872; Winkler, 1936) (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Illustration of Polak's observations (based on oral communication and notes), which first appeared in Ploss, 1872

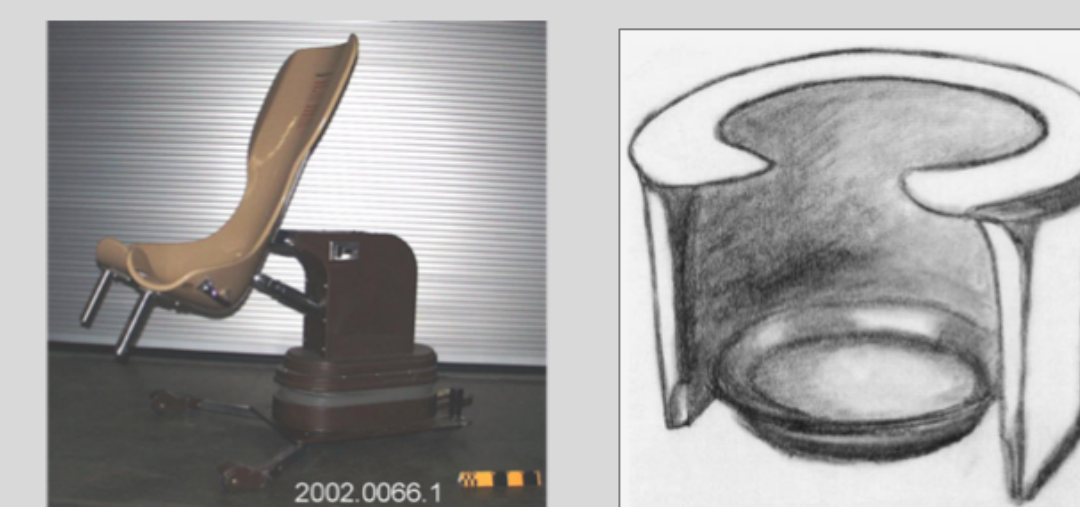


Fig. 7 (left): BirthRite seat
Fig. 8 (right): Dutch-designed birthing stool



Fig. 9 (a and b): “Birth E-Z” birthing chair

IV. CLINICAL STUDIES & MODERN BIRTHING TOOLS

Current clinical studies of birthing positions could be used to speculate upon the position of women during labor and the use of implements and furniture. There are numerous modern clinical studies that evaluate the use of birth stools and chairs, all with positive results, though none particularly address birth bricks. However, these studies can still be used to ascertain the most effective usage of birthing tools and furniture.

These clinical studies all utilize tools that provide support and/or something for the mother to lean on (Fig. 7-9) (Stewart, 1983; Cottrell, 1987; Waldenström, 1991; Thies-Lagergren, 2009). Based on these studies, it is unsubstantiated to speculate that the mother kneeled on the birth bricks, or that she stood on them during delivery. She may, however, have utilized the standing position during the primary stage of labor, as both a means of stretching and to make it more accessible for the midwife to carry out a genital exam. During the second stage of labor, though, this position would have lacked support, even with assistants standing nearby to steady the mother. Further, none of these clinical or ethnographic studies support the usage of a singular brick. Most likely, if used at all in a functional sense, the mother used the bricks as sitting support, with her buttocks situated on them. This position would have also allowed space for the midwife to regularly examine the woman's laboring progress and assist in the child's delivery.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This research has demonstrated that scholars base their reconstructions of ancient birth bricks on a small number of texts that hail from a broad range of time periods and regions. The definition of many of the central terms lack consensus, including the question of whether one or more bricks were used. There is a dearth of archaeological data, and scholars disproportionately depend on a small number of ethnographic sources, most with problematic origins. Modern clinical studies of birthing aides also question the plausibility of most scholarly reconstructions.

Thus, one cannot use these sources to reconstruct how the bricks were used as a tool during childbirth in the ancient world. Future work can, however, focus more on the exact ritual context of the bricks. By accepting that a functional role is unlikely, scholars should be able to move forward with more productive avenues of symbolic study of the bricks of birth.