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BECOMING ISIS: MYTH, MAGIC, MEDICINE, AND REPRODUCTION IN
ANCIENT EGYPT

by

Chrystal Elaine Goudsouzian

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: History

The University of Memphis

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DEDICATION

To my mom, Cherie, who taught me how to be a mother.

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ABSTRACT

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In ancient Egypt, sexuality, fertility, and the conception of children was of central importance not just to personal identity, but also to family and social structure. Because of the significance of birth in both the physical world and in the spiritual realm, references to reproduction, including fertility, conception, pregnancy, and childbirth, can be found in a wide variety of textual sources. Specifically, mythic events and scenarios, including those in magical spells, medico-magical spells, and funerary texts, reflected Egyptian reproductive conceptions and practices. Further, the Egyptians employed and called on these mythic episodes and archetypes to create divinely charged myth-mirroring space, spells, and remedies to manage reproductive events. Investigating this complex matrix of cultural ideas and practices reflected in text, augmented by data from select iconography, material culture, and human remains, this study resituates Egyptian reproductive lives within their own cultural context, through the Egyptians' own terms and reproductive timeline. From conception to the child's first breath, this study attempts to access the beliefs that would have informed and shaped the Egyptians' reproductive experiences.

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CHAPTER 1 Introduction

Coffin Text 148

TAKING SHAPE AS A FALCON: Lightning strikes; the gods are afraid. Isis wakes pregnant with the seed of her brother Osiris.

The woman raises herself quickly; her heart is joyful over the seed of her brother Osiris. She says: "Oh gods, I am Isis, sister of Osiris, who wept for the forefathers of Osiris, who judged the slaughtering of the two lands. His seed is within my belly; I knit together the shape of the god in the egg as my son, who is at the head of the Ennead, who will rule this land, the inheritance from his father Geb, who will speak on behalf of his father, who will kill Seth, the enemy of his father, Osiris. Come gods, you will make his protection within my womb – know in your hearts that he is your lord; this god who is in the egg, blue haired of form, lord of the gods, great and beautiful are the vanes of his two plumes.

*"Oh," says Atum-Re: "guard your heart, woman. How do you know that he is the god, lord and heir of the Ennead, who you made within the egg?"
"I am Isis, more pure and well esteemed than the gods – The god within this belly of mine; he is the seed of Osiris."*

Then Atum-Re says: "Oh, mistress, you are pregnant and you are hidden. You will give birth, being pregnant for the gods as he is the seed of Osiris. May the opponent who slew his father not come and break the egg that is within. Great of Magic will guard against him."

Then Isis says: "Hear this gods, that which Atum-Re, Lord of the Mansion of Images, has said. He has commanded protection for me and my son who is within my belly. He has knit together an entourage around him within this womb of mine since he knew that he was the heir of Osiris. Protection has been given by Atum-Re, Lord of the Gods, to this falcon that is in my belly."

"Come and go forth on the earth that I may give adoration to you. The retainers of your father Osiris will serve you; I will make your name when you have reached the horizon, having passed the battlements of the Mansion of Him Whose Name is Hidden. Power comes forth from within my vagina, striking power has arrived in my vagina, and when striking power comes to its limit...sunshine sails."¹

¹ Author's translation of Coffin Text 148, a spell for taking shape as a falcon.

Ancient Egyptian Reproductive Lives

Upon learning of her pregnancy, the Egyptian goddess Isis is both elated and proud. She proclaims the paternity of her unborn child and stresses her role in shaping the child in her womb. She appeals to her divine family for protection from chaotic forces, lest the egg break in its formative stages. Upon gaining divine protection, she journeys to a safe place, the marshy Delta, to prepare for the birth of her son in secret. When she finishes her months of pregnancy but remains with child, she threatens the gods to deliver her son to her. Luckily, when her time of labor finally comes, Isis delivers her son Horus safely on her birth stool with the assistance of her divine attendants. During her pregnancy and parturition, Isis is in a liminal state, both in danger and dangerous, powerful and powerless. Through her own moxie, the sanctuary of the gods, and the assistance of her attendants, she safely delivers her divine child and protects him in his early infancy.

Isis is fortunate that, despite the hazards surrounding pregnancy and birth, both she and the child come out relatively unscathed. For many expectant mothers in ancient Egypt, this was not the case. Carrying and birthing a child in the ancient world was a common but dangerous experience. The Cairo Calendar reveals that there were more unlucky days for a child to be born than lucky ones.² Cemeteries confirm high mortality rates for women during their young

² The Cairo Calendar, translation from A. Bakir, *The Cairo Calendar no. 86637* (Cairo: General Organization for Government Printing Offices, 1966); also noted in L. Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 69.

adult years,³ and birth trauma can be seen in female mummies of childbearing age.⁴ Furthermore, when pregnant, parturient, and in the postpartum period, women may have been more susceptible to malicious entities. The Egyptians were very careful to manage these states to ensure the safety of women and their unborn children. These liminal periods and situations, like other aspects of Egyptian personal and social lives, were understood through divine archetypes, accessed through ritual, and managed through magical and medico-magical practices.

Realizing Reproductive Lives

Although conception, pregnancy, and childbirth were regular events in ancient Egyptian lives, scholars have had difficulty identifying and employing sufficient source material to present a full and nuanced picture of reproductive conceptions and practices. Because the ancient Egyptians rarely referenced potentially dangerous and uncertain events such as pregnancy or childbirth, studies on reproduction have been hampered. The corpus of evidence from the Pharaonic period that discusses or depicts aspects of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth is surprisingly small. The available material comes from a variety of different contexts, time periods, and areas of Egypt. Additionally, given the

³ M. Masali and B. Chiarelli, "Data on the Remains of Ancient Egyptians," in *Population Biology of the Ancient Egyptians*, ed. D. Borthwell and B. Chiarelli (London: Academic Press, 1973), 165.

⁴ D. E. Derry, "Note on Five Pelves of Women of the Eleventh Dynasty in Egypt," *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 42 (1935): 490-495 and E. Strouhal, "Queen Mutnodjmet at Memphis: Anthropological and Paleopathological Evidence," *L'Égyptologie en 1979: axes prioritaires de recherches* (1982): 317-322.

Egyptians' love of wordplay and visual puns,⁵ as well as the use of reproductive euphemisms and culturally specific terminology, sources on reproductive lives can be difficult for one outside the cultural milieu to identify and interpret. Due to the dearth of sources and the difficulties with the extant primary source material, scholars have attempted only small-scale studies on specific aspects of reproductive culture⁶ or presented short general overviews of reproductive lives in articles⁷ and book chapters.⁸ Though the sources on reproduction are few and

⁵ In ancient Egypt, writing words or creating images could give power to the figures or events that were rendered. Situations that were dangerous, liminal, and even those that were deemed culturally inappropriate, were often not explicitly written or depicted in text and image. These situations could, however, be referenced through euphemisms and word play, especially in the form of verbal and visual puns. These word and image games, in many cases, were not meant to be funny, but gave important meaning to words and depictions through metaphor and allusion. A fine example is the common depiction of men spearing fish in their tombs. The verb *stj* could mean "to spear" and is a homophone for the verb *stj* "to impregnate," and fish were erotic symbols. Therefore, a scene that at first glance suggests fishing had overt sexual undertones for the man and his sexual endeavors in the afterlife.

⁶ Representative works include: A. M. Roth, "Father Earth, Mother Sky: Ancient Egyptian Beliefs About Conception and Fertility," in *Reading The Body*, ed. A. E. Rautman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 187-201; H. Goedicke, "Rudjet's Delivery," *Varia Aegyptiaca* 1 (1985): 19-26; A.R. Schulman, "A Birth Scene (?) from Memphis," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 22 (1985): 97-103; G. Pinch, "Childbirth and Female Figurines at Deir el-Medina and el-Amarna," *Orientalia* 52 (1983): 405-414; B. Kemp, "Wall Paintings from the Workmen's Village at el-'Amarna," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 65 (1979): 47-53; P. Ghalioungui, S. Khalil, and A. Ammar, "On An Ancient Egyptian Method of Diagnosing Pregnancy and Determining Foetal Sex," *Medical History* 7 (1963): 241-246; E. Brunner-Traut, "Die Wochenlaube," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* 3 (1955): 11-30; F. Jonckheere, "Le durée de la gestation d'après les textes égyptiens," *Chronique d'Égypte* 59 (1955): 19-45; and E. Henriksen, "Pregnancy Tests of the Past and Present," *Western Journal of Surgery, Obstetrics and Gynecology* 49 (1941): 567-575.

⁷ Representative articles include: J. Loose, "Laborious 'Rites de Passage': Birth Crisis in This World and Beyond," in *Sesto Congresso Internazionale Di Egittologia, Volume 2* (Turin: International Congress of Egyptology, 1993), 285-290 and G. Robins, "Women and Children in Peril: Pregnancy, Birth, and Infant Mortality in Ancient Egypt," *KMT* 5.4 (1994-5): 24-35.

far between, and the material varies greatly by time, place, and purpose, it is still a worthwhile endeavor to ask how the Egyptians understood their reproductive lives, and more specifically to answer the question: “What did the ancient Egyptians believe about their reproductive bodies, and how did these beliefs influence the way that they approached and managed reproductive experiences and events?” This study attempts to resituate, recover, and recast Egyptian sources to reconstruct and more fully access the ways in which the Egyptians may have lived their reproductive lives.

Resituating Reproductive Lives

Reproductive lives exist within an active matrix of social and personal experiences, with the body at the center. The biological processes that constitute reproductive lives are similar in most humans; however, these reproductive experiences are both uniquely coded in different societies and uniquely experienced by each individual. Socially constructed ideas that surround the body and its functions are conveyed to members of a society through culturally specific systems of meaning, symbol, and interaction. Within these systems, the body serves as the nexus; it is the locus of both physical and emotional

⁸ Representative chapters include: C. Graves-Brown, “Birth, Life, and Death,” in *Dancing for Hathor* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 51-72; K. Szpakowska, “Birth,” in *Daily Life in Ancient Egypt, Recreating Lahun* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 23-44; “Sensual Women” in J. Toivari-Viitala, *Women at Deir El-Medina* (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor Het Nabije Oosten, 2001), 139-170; J. Tyldesley, “Married Bliss,” in *Daughters of Isis* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 45-81; G. Robins, “Fertility, Pregnancy, and Childbirth,” in *Women in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 75-91; E. Strouhal, “The Start of Life,” in *Life of the Ancient Egyptians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 11-19; B. Watterson, “Health and Childbirth,” in *Women in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 1992), 73-93; and J. J. and R. Janssen, “Pregnancy and Birth,” in *Growing Up in Ancient Egypt* (London: The Rubicon Press, 1990), 1-13.

experience. Therefore the individual body is a receptor, interpreter, and mediator of reproductive culture that is constantly receiving, reconstructing, and reconstituting social norms. The interplay between society, the individual, and the body colors how women, men, families, and communities engage in, understand, and manage reproductive events.

Yet how does one access this complex, subjective culture of reproduction and embodied experience in a society such as Ancient Egypt, which is so far removed from our own time and culture? As Lynn Meskell has noted, most modern assessments of Egyptian sexual life have made the mistake of casting the Egyptians in terms of scholars' own cultural experiences and backgrounds. Meskell has suggested that Western notions of sexuality and gender have plagued most studies of the sexual and reproductive culture of ancient Egypt; they cast women, men, and sexual relationships in roles and categories that bear little relationship to the lived experiences of the Egyptians.⁹ Further, the separation of sexuality and birth, of mother and child, and of the sacred/spiritual and birth in modern scholarship reflects Western conceptions of private and reproductive life¹⁰ far more than it does the ancient Egyptian past. Leaving men, families, and communities out of these narratives also denies their critical involvement in interpreting and shaping reproductive experiences and culture.

⁹ L. Meskell, "Re-em(bed)ding Sex: Domesticity, Sexuality and Ritual in New Kingdom Egypt," in *Archaeologies of Sexuality*, ed. R. Schmidt and B. Voss (New York: Routledge, 2000), 255 and *Archaeologies of Social Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 97.

¹⁰ On modern Western interpretive issues concerning childbirth and reproductive practices, see R. Kahn, *Bearing Meaning, The Language of Birth* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 4.

Though it is nearly impossible to separate oneself from one's culture, and even more difficult to attempt to recover cultural conceptions from another society, this study attempts to resituate Egyptian reproductive lives within their own cultural context, through the Egyptians' own terms, reproductive timeline, and experiences. By investigating reproduction from conception to the child's first breath through written sources spanning the Pharaonic period,¹¹ reproductive lives and events will be investigated and presented through the Egyptians' own relevant myths, literature, magical spells, and medico-magical remedies.

Recovering Reproductive Lives

Unfortunately, no surviving sources from ancient Egypt were created for the purpose of explicating reproductive functions, beliefs, or practices. As with many other areas of Egyptological inquiry, access to ideas, beliefs, and practices comes from analyzing a wide range of disparate sources. This study looks for traces of reproductive conceptions and practices in a wide variety of source material, including, texts, iconography, material culture, and human remains. The study is rooted in textual material, pulling reproductive references from funerary texts, magical spells, religious hymns, medico-magical texts, and even royal inscriptions and village economic records. These textual snippets are also

¹¹ Because of the small number of sources that come from the Pharaonic period that reference, mention, or discuss reproductive lives, it is necessary to employ wide ranging sources from all periods of Egyptian history to attempt to more fully access reproductive culture. However, this study does not attempt to identify specific actions or reproductive understandings of any one person or group, but more generally looks to elucidate general ideas and conceptions present in Egyptian sources that represent ideas and conceptions on reproduction within the society. Unfortunately, because the source material is limited and was not originally composed to discuss reproduction, it is impossible, in most cases, to track continuity and change or identify specific ideas and beliefs at any one point in time or place in ancient Egypt's long history.

invoked to create an overarching narrative that follows the Egyptian understanding of the reproductive cycle from conception to the birth of the child. The study employs select iconographic and material culture remains when these items can help clarify references in text and improve our understanding of possible reproductive practices. It employs the use of human remains, to, when possible, return the ancient body to the discussion of reproductive lives. Finally, the study draws on the previous work of modern scholars to augment its analysis of reproductive culture, belief, and practice.

This project attempts to access the complex matrix of cultural ideas and conceptions that would have informed and shaped reproductive experiences. By collecting and analyzing sources created for different purposes, from a wide range of times and places within Egypt, it admittedly creates an artificial historical construction that cannot, in most cases, reconstruct lived or even commonly experienced aspects of reproductive lives. However, the project's approach does lead to a more complete presentation of Egyptian reproductive culture than has previously been presented. It puts forth not the experience of one Egyptian woman or her family at a certain time or place, but the ideas and practices that, in part, could have shaped reproductive beliefs and experiences for any Egyptian.

Recasting Reproductive Lives

In ancient Egyptian culture, religion – which included myth, magic, and medicine – was embedded in the fabric of society. Myths both reflected and shaped political and social ideology; magic functioned to uphold cosmic and

social order; and medico-magical practices were employed to protect the inhabitants and the state. The creation and bearing of an Egyptian child fell within this milieu. Reproductive events, like other parts of daily life, were conceptualized, experienced, and managed through a cultural system that was based in and influenced by religious beliefs. Although scholars have recognized the importance of myth, magic, and medicine in many aspects of ancient Egyptian daily life, scholars have not fully examined sources of this nature for the purpose of elucidating reproductive lives. Looking at reproductive lives as part a distinct, religiously coded cultural system allows one to reconceptualize and recast Egyptian reproductive culture and experiences in a more culturally appropriate manner.

Myth

The multifaceted nature of Egyptian religion allowed for a multitude of available deities and myths through which to view and understand the process of conception, the liminality of pregnancy, and the dangers of childbirth. Though these archetypes and stories generally come from the funerary realm and are cast in mythic language, which includes metaphor, symbol, and allusion, the reproductive events that were understood as occurring in the realms of the gods and the dead were likely well known in Egyptian culture.¹² These texts can be

¹² Egyptologists have presented a number of theories on myth and the presence/common knowledge of myth in Egyptian culture. This study, based on the mythically charged imagery and practices evident in reproductive culture assumes that mythic stories, including those that discussed reproductive events, were part of an oral and visual tradition that transmitted myth and mythic events to the Egyptian people. For an overview of scholar's views on Egyptian myth and support of the likely oral and visual transmission of myth in daily life see J. Baines, "Egyptian Myth and Discourse: Myth,

exceptionally useful in accessing reproductive understandings and practices. Often these myths reflect both the cultural and biological conceptions of reproduction in ancient Egypt; they were also likely part of the oral and visual tradition that lent models for gender roles, gave meaning to reproductive experiences, and effectively linked the mortal realm to the divine. Their close study not only reveals Egyptian conceptions of reproduction, but also points to the importance of myth and myth-mirroring ritual and ritual objects for protection of those in liminal states.

The myths concerning the reproductive lives of the gods, which often appear in spells for the rebirth of the deceased in funerary texts and magical texts, are vital to this study. Though they represent mythic time and space, the mechanics of reproduction clearly, in some cases, reflect real world childbirth practices. For instance, one of the most complete stories of the god Horus's birth, which appears at the beginning of this study, comes from a spell for rebirth that is found in the Coffin Texts. Augmented by other facets of the storyline from additional spells and funerary texts, this episode is one of the most useful narratives of the reproductive cycle from ancient Egypt. Since the reconstructed myth discusses conception, fears, and issues in Isis's pregnancy, as well as the physical event of Horus's birth, it can be juxtaposed with other extant sources on reproduction, including texts, depictions, and material culture, to try to elucidate reproductive conceptions and practices and to decode the mythic symbolism and meaning that surrounded reproductive events.

Gods, and the Early Written and Iconographic Record," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 50.2 (1991): 81-105.

Other birth and rebirth myths, such as those of the sun god Re and the chthonic god Osiris, are also central to this investigation. Though largely unexamined in the context of childbirth in the mortal realm, myths of birth/rebirth and the practices of rebirth that were carried out for the deceased to enter the afterlife were certainly linked, if not based in, the language, symbol, and practice of the physical birth of an Egyptian child. Though scholars have noted the relationship between the tomb/coffin and the womb,¹³ the importance of female figures and mothers in tombs,¹⁴ and the parallels between the funerary Opening of the Mouth ritual and the actual opening/strengthening of a child's mouth at birth,¹⁵ the bulk of mythic texts that deal with rebirth in the funerary realm have not been investigated in the context of physical birth. Whether the deceased is likened to Horus, Re, or Osiris in rebirth, birth language and practices in these myths and the associated funeral practices recall, allude to, and may even mirror

¹³ See J. Assmann, "Death as Return," in *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 164-185 and S. Onstine, "The Relationship between Re and Osiris in the Book of Caverns," *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 25 (1998): 66-77.

¹⁴ See J. Assmann, "Death as Return," in *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, 164-185.; H. Fischer, "The Position of the Wife and Mother in Tomb Chapels," in *Egyptian Women of the Old Kingdom and the Heracleopolitan Period* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), 3-17; S. Whale, *The Family in the Eighteenth Dynasty: A Study of the Representation of Family in Private Tombs* (Sydney: The Australian Centre for Egyptology, 1989); and C. Desroches-Noblecourt, "'Concubines du Mort' et mères de famille au Moyen Empire," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 53 (1953): 7-47.

¹⁵ A. M. Roth "Fingers, Stars, and the 'Opening of the Mouth': The Nature and Function of the *ntrwj*-Blades," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 79 (1993): 57-79 and "The *psš-ḳf* and the 'Opening of the Mouth' Ceremony: A Ritual of Birth and Rebirth," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 78 (1992): 113-147.

birth practices that took place in the physical world during a woman's labor and the birth of her child.

Magic

Magic, or *heka*, was a creative force that could be used by the gods and man to create, heal, and destroy. *Heka* was not separate from, or a threat to, religion; it was a main component in and of divinity and religion. In fact, *heka* was the force that animated Egyptian religion.¹⁶ Unlike in modern Western religions, where magic is often regarded as the antithesis to religion, magic in ancient Egypt was an integral part of both state and personal religious beliefs and actions. It was essential to the effectiveness of hymns, prayers, spells, and rituals.

Magical incantations and rituals were the vehicle that connected the divine and earthly realms. The Egyptians employed magic to manage many parts of their political, social, and personal lives. Magic offered a defense against known and unknown threats; it could provide psychological comfort through the appeal for divine intervention and protection. Due to the power and danger associated with reproduction and childbirth, it is not surprising that magic was used to manage reproductive lives. In the so-called "wochenlaube" scenes¹⁷ that depict mother and child in the postpartum period, for example, it is not surprising that the imagery depicted surrounding the mother and child recalls a space similar to the marshy, papyrus filled Delta where the archetypal mother goddess, Isis, gave

¹⁶ R. Ritner, "Traditional Egyptian Religion" in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. M. Meyer and P. Mireki (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 52.

¹⁷ See E. Brunner-Traut, "Die Wochenlaube," 11-30.

birth. Just as divinely imbued ritual space had magical efficacy, mythically potent spells were also invoked to protect the mother and child. Closer investigation of these types of texts, spaces, and practices can shed new light on reproductive lives.

Medicine

Medicine, like magic, cannot be separated from Egyptian religion. Medical diagnoses, spells, and prescriptions were often just as deeply rooted in Egyptian myth and religion as they were in clinical observation. When a patient was diagnosed, the cause of illness could be from either natural or supernatural causes.¹⁸ And, when that patient was treated for an ailment, trauma, or disease, the remedy's ingredients could have clinical or mythic potency, or both.

Reproductive conditions, fears, and ailments were often addressed through medico-magical practices. Diagnoses and prescriptions for reproductive lives relevant to this study include those for infertility, conception, pregnancy, hastening birth, birth trauma, and immediate postpartum complications. These diagnoses and remedies, which are known through surviving medico-magical texts, are integral for reconstructing Egyptian conceptions of the reproductive body and its functions.

Reconstructing Reproductive Lives

This study will investigate and reconstruct the experience of reproduction in ancient Egypt, returning reproductive events to their own cultural context to better illuminate these ancient conceptions and practices. The first chapter of the

¹⁸ J. Nunn, *Ancient Egyptian Medicine* (London: The British Museum Press, 1997), 96.

study, “The One Who Will Speak for His Father:’ The Importance of Family and Fertility,” presents the importance of family in Egyptian society and explores the relationship between fertility and identity. The second chapter, “His Seed is Within My Womb:’ Understanding Conception and the Formation of the Child,” focuses on the Egyptians’ understanding of their own reproductive bodies and the physical and spiritual processes involved in conceiving and forming a child. The third chapter, “This Falcon in My Womb:’ Diagnosing and Managing Pregnancy,” centers on the Egyptian experience of pregnancy, from attempting to diagnose the pregnancy and the sex of a child to the threat of miscarriage and the management of malicious forces. The fourth chapter, “Within the God’s Tamarisk Clump:’ The Space of Birth,” looks at the preparations for labor and the attendees. The fifth chapter, “Come and Go Forth on the Earth:’ Accelerating Birthgiving,” surveys the Egyptian understanding of labor and the means by which it could be eased and hastened. The penultimate chapter, “I Have Passed Between Her Thighs:’ The Emergence of the Child,” chronicles the arrival of the child. The final chapter, “I Fan Air at Your Nostrils:’ The Moments After Birth,” looks at the actions taken for both mother and child following a successful birth, including the role of the father. The conclusion, “Becoming Isis,” summarizes the findings of the study.

CHAPTER 2

“The One Who Will Speak For His Father:” The Importance of Family and Fertility

*His seed is within my belly; I knit together the shape of the god in the egg as my son, who is at the head of the Ennead, who will rule this land, the inheritance from his father Geb, who will speak for his father, who will kill Seth, the enemy of his father, Osiris.*¹

Osiris and Isis were said to have fallen in love while still in the womb of their mother, Nut.² Although eventually separated in the earthly realm by Osiris's untimely death, they were the quintessential couple. Even death, they found, could not divide them; after Osiris's murder, Isis found her husband and magically imbued him with the power to conceive Horus, his heir. The conception, gestation, and rearing of Horus was of central importance to maintaining the proper order of the world. Horus, as king, continued the rightful lineage of the divine couple and stood triumphant over chaos, becoming himself a symbol of *maat*, or right order on earth.

Egyptian myth both reflected and modeled notions of family life; family was not just desirable but central to maintaining the proper order of the world. By creating a family, an Egyptian mother and father begat children who were vital not only to their daily lives, but also to their rebirth in the afterlife. In the royal realm, children brought joy and were a physical expression of the virility of the king. Male heirs, specifically, ensured that when the king left this world for the next, one of his sons could become the Horus to his Osiris. The living Horus

¹ Author's translation of Coffin Text 148, a spell for taking shape as a falcon.

² Though Isis and Osiris's relationship will be discussed in detail through Egyptian funerary texts, this romantic snippet comes from the later narration of the story of Isis and Osiris from Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*. Translation of the Greek from J. G. Griffiths, *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1970), 137.

upheld *maat* through the continuation of the divine legacy. He both ensured and reinforced the regenerative and cyclical order of the world by appeasing the gods, shepherding the people, and attending to the mortuary cult of his father. For the ordinary Egyptian, begetting a family, one that included a male heir, specifically, was of equal importance. Children were also a source of joy and an expression of male virility in non-royal families. However, in this agrarian society, the children of non-royal individuals were often integral to the family's successful fulfillment of professional and/or agricultural responsibilities and domestic duties. Parents also depended on their children to support them when they became sick, or if they reached old age. Most important, children ensured an afterlife to their parents through the facilitation of funerary rites and the maintenance of mortuary cults. As the stele of Padiosobek notes:

A man to whom no child was born is one who does not exist. He has really not been born! His deeds will not be remembered; his name will not be pronounced, like one who has not existed. I am a tree that was torn out with its roots, because of what happened to me.³

It was so important to have children that those who did not face a bleak afterlife; like a tree removed from the earth, they left no trace and had no ability to regenerate themselves.

Because the creation of life was so vital both to Egyptian ideology and personal survival in the physical and spiritual realm, it is not surprising that virility, fertility, and fecundity were central aspects to Egyptian personhood in both life and death. The creation and bearing of children figures prominently in myth, and

³ Translation of the stela of Padiosobek from M. Lichtheim, *Maat in the Egyptian Autobiographies and Related Studies* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 191-201.

it is clear that mythic reproductive roles were modeled on Egyptian conceptions of male and female sexual identities. At the same time, due to the permeating nature of religion in all aspects of Egyptian culture, these mythic models presented, shaped, and interacted with lived reproductive culture. The gods who gave meaning to and shaped reproductive culture were appealed to in hopes of gaining and protecting virility, fertility, and fecundity. It is clear that Egyptian men and women took care to rouse, maintain, and protect their bodies' creative capacities through prayers, dedications, and spells. These actions supported an important part of masculine and feminine identities, ultimately imbuing these individuals with the power to create families. The creation of families ensured continued order not only microcosmically within the family itself, but also in the world at large.

“It Is Proper to Make People”

Though marriage is, of course, not required for the creation of children, a domestic arrangement that centered on the cohabitation of a man and woman and the begetting of children appears to have been the norm in Egyptian society. A variety of literal terms were used to denote marriage such as: *jrjt m hmt* “take as a wife,”⁴ *grg pr* “found a house,”⁵ and *wnm jrm* “to eat together.”⁶ Little is

⁴ Some examples of the use of the phrase *jrjt m hmt* in texts of daily life include the New Kingdom documents O. Berlin P.12406, O. DeM 663, O. Varille 30, P. DeM 27, and P. Turin 1966.

⁵ *grg pr* is commonly used in didactic literature and examples of this phrase can be seen in the instruction texts of Hardjedef, Ptahhotep, and Any.

⁶ Some examples of the use of the phrase *wnm jrm* as denoting status of relationship include the New Kingdom documents P. Turin 2070 and O. Petrie 18.

known about the rules and decorum of courtship, though some terms and documents from Deir el Medina⁷ and marriage contracts from the Late Period⁸ shed light on the possible negotiations and financial agreements that may have occurred before and during a marriage. It is almost certain, however, that the customs that dictated the selection of a spouse varied over time, among different classes, and even within specific villages and families. What we do know is that conceiving and bearing children was of supreme importance in Egyptian families.

Wisdom literature from all periods of Egyptian history suggests that, ideally, a young man should procure a wife and have children early on in his life, but not before he is able to support a family. The Instruction of Any suggests that one should “Take a wife while you’re young, that she make a son for you.” It further stresses the importance of starting a family early when it states that a wife

⁷ In J. Toivari-Viitala’s articles “Marriage at Deir el Medina” in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Egyptologists*, ed C. J. Eyre (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1998), 1157-1163 and “A Case Study of Ancient Egyptian Marriage Practices in the Workman’s Community at Deir el Medina” in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001*, ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting (Helsinki: The University of Helsinki, 2002), 613-619, she speculates on marriage negotiations and gift-giving practices in the New Kingdom village of Deir el Medina. Noting both the exchange of dowries and bride wealth between the royal family and foreign diplomats in the Amarna letters, as well as groom to bride gifts in Late Period marriage contracts, Toivari-Viitala shows that in Deir el Medina village documents O. Berlin P. 12406 and P. Turin 1966, men were recorded as providing goods to their father in-laws in relation to making the men’s daughters their wives. These gifts seem to have been given not just on occasion, but over a period of time. In addition, one text, P. DeM 27, which records the complaints of a villager after one of higher rank sleeps with his intended bride, seems to suggest that the start of this payment, or perhaps a separate bride price – a *f3j g3yt* “bringing a bundle” – may have given a man sexual rights over the woman he intended to marry.

⁸ For a discussion of these documents, and more information on marriage customs in ancient Egypt see W. Pestman, *Marriage and Matrimonial Property in Ancient Egypt: A Contribution to Establishing the Legal Position of Women* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961).

should “bear for you while you’re youthful” as “It is proper to make people.”⁹ This New Kingdom composition echoes earlier instructions that outlined prescriptions for beginning a family. Composed in the Middle Kingdom, but set in the Old Kingdom, the Maxims of Ptahhotep puts emphasis on starting a family when established – “When you prosper, found your house” – and is coupled with advice on selecting and keeping a wife. This text implies that to ensure that a wife remains content and continues to bear children for her husband, one should “Love your wife with ardor, fill her belly, clothe her back; ointment is what soothes her body. Gladden her heart as long as you live; she is a fertile field for her lord. Do not contend with her in court; keep her from power, restrain her.” Keeping one’s wife happy (and under control) meant that she would not instigate a divorce and would “stay in your house.”¹⁰ This advice is similar to the contemporary advice in The Instruction of Prince Hardjedef, which also stresses the importance of a wife, family, and heir and further advises that men should “Take a wife who is mistress of her heart, a son will be born to you,”¹¹ implying that woman who is in control of her emotions makes a good wife and mother.

⁹ Translation of The Instruction of Any from M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: Volume 2: The New Kingdom* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2006), 136.

¹⁰ Translation of The Maxims of Ptahhotep from M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: Volume 1: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2006), 69.

¹¹ Translation of The Instruction of Prince Hardjedef from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 58.

“The Seed Which Issues From His Phallus”

Once a man selected a wife and founded a house, begetting children was not just personally desired but socially expected. Children were reflective of a man’s sexual prowess and virility and the creation of a family lead to positive social status for the man within his community. As The Instruction of Any notes, “Happy is the man whose people are many; he is saluted on account of his progeny.”¹² Male sexual potency and creative power was an intrinsic aspect of male identity in ancient Egypt. Because the Egyptians regarded semen as the fluid of life, recognizing and praising its role in creation, men were the ones imbued with the ability to create new life in the divine, mortal, and funerary realms.

In Egyptian religion, gods and animals with creative powers were male. The gods associated with male power, virility, and fertility, such as Atum, Amun-Re, Min, and Osiris, were often depicted ithyphallic - a literal expression of their masculine strength and potency. These and other creator gods such as Khnum and Ptah, when rendered in zoomorphic form, were depicted as sexually powerful male animals such as rams and bulls. Bulls, especially, served as a symbol of male strength and virility in both ritual and language. As early as the Narmer palette,¹³ the king is shown both wearing a bull tail and as a bull himself. Not surprisingly, expressions like *k3 mwt=f* “bull of his mother” or *k3-nht* “mighty

¹² Translation of The Instruction of Any from M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 136.

¹³ The Narmer Palette, Museums of Egyptian Antiquities, Cairo, catalog no. 14716.

bull” were used to express the sexual potency of gods, kings, and the reborn deceased. It is further possible that more than one hieroglyph related to life and procreation may have originated from the bull’s spine.¹⁴

It may also be from the bull that the Egyptians based their anatomical understanding of the creation of sperm.¹⁵ Schwabe, Adams, and Hodge have noted that the anatomical make-up of the bull’s penis, which has a long retractor penis muscle near its lower vertebrae, could have been easily mistaken by the Egyptians as a single organ that was attached to and descended from the spine.¹⁶ Due to this observation, the Egyptians may have surmised that the male organ in humans, too, was connected to the spine. As Serge Sauneron and Jean Yoyotte have both shown, the Egyptians believed that semen was derived from the bones of men, originating in the spine.¹⁷ From there, sperm traveled to the

¹⁴ For a discussion of the hieroglyphs that may have originated out of the spine of the bull, including the *djed* pillar and the *ankh* sign, see C. Schwabe, J. Adams, and C. Hodge, “Egyptian Beliefs About the Bull’s Spine: An Anatomical Origin for Ankh,” *Anthropological Linguistics* 24.4 (1982): 445-479.

¹⁵ It is clear that a good deal of Egyptian anatomical knowledge came from the animal world. Many of the hieroglyphs that are used to designate body parts in humans came from animals, and scholars have suggested a great deal of information about human anatomy was derived from veterinary knowledge, especially that by priests who cared for and sacrificed temple animals. For more, see S. Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

¹⁶ C. Schwabe, J. Adams, and C. Hodge, “Egyptian Beliefs About the Bull’s Spine,” 445-7.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the concept of sperm production from the bones see S. Sauneron, “Le germe dans les os,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale* 60 (1960): 19-27 and J. Yoyotte, “Les os et la semence masculine à propos d’une théorie physiologique égyptienne,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale* 61 (1962): 139-146. This concept occurs in the Greek Hippocratic texts as well and its origin has been attributed to the Egyptians, for a discussion see P. Ghalioungui, “The Relationship of Pharaonic to Greek and Later Medicine,” *Bulletin of the Cleveland Medical Library* 15:3 (1968): 96-107.

testicles, as Papyrus Ebers 854 explains, there were “two *mtw* to his two testicles; it is they that give semen.”¹⁸

With the ability to generate life-giving sperm, creative power was attributed to men. In early creation myths, the creator god Atum generates himself out of the watery chaos of Nun and begins to shape the gods and the world by masturbation. As Pyramid Text 527 relates, “Atum is he who came into being, as one who came (with penis) extended in Heliopolis. He put his penis in his fist so that he might make orgasm with it, and the two twins were born, Shu and Tefnut.”¹⁹ While the hand of Atum is denoted as female (*ḏrjt*), and later identified with goddess like Hathor, who bore the title *ḏrjt ntr* “Hand of the God,” creation itself comes from the sperm of Atum.²⁰ Other creator gods such as Ptah and Khnum created life on their own through speech and by sculpting, respectively.

In the mortal realm, male sexual potency was central to sexual desire and in the act of creation. New Kingdom phallus votives left for Hathor suggest that male fertility was celebrated and/or prayed for by supplicants of the goddess.²¹ Corn mummies with erect phalli, too, were likely a part of Osirian rituals, which



¹⁸ Author’s translation of Papyrus Ebers 854.



¹⁹ Translation of Pyramid Text 527, a recitation invoking the gods, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2006), 164.

²⁰ For more on the creative powers of Atum see J. Zandee, “The Birth-Giving Creator-God in Ancient Egypt,” in *Studies in Pharaonic Religion and Society in Honour of J. Gwyn Griffiths*, ed. A. B. Lloyd (London: The Egypt Exploration Society, 1992), 169-185.

²¹ For a detailed discussion of votive phalli offered to Hathor and other fertility deities in ancient Egypt, see G. Pinch, *Votive Offerings to Hathor* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 2003), 235-245.

celebrated fertility as creative and regenerative male power.²² Further, we know that in the New Kingdom men prayed to Amun-Re in his form as Amun-Re Kamutef, likely for masculine power, which could have easily included male fertility and virility.²³

With such a focus on male virility and the creative power of semen, it is not surprising that the sign for penis D52  and the sign for penis issuing semen D53  came to determine nouns that were used to denote maleness²⁴ or verbs that denoted creative²⁵ or sexual action.²⁶ Most significantly, the noun *tꜣy*, used to denote “man,” was determined with a penis issuing semen

. In its most explicit variant writing  *tꜣy* was depicted with

the penis sign D52  over/in the sign N41  that was used to denote the


²² For more on corn mummies see R. Maarten, “Corn Mummies,” *Oudheidkundige Mededelingen uit het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden te Leiden* 63 (1982): 7–38 and R. Schulz, “A Corn Mummy Decoded,” *The Journal of the Walters Art Museum* 63 (2005): 5-14.

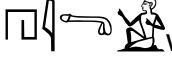
²³ For a fine example of a votive offering to Amun-Re Kamutef, see British Museum EA 358, an 18th dynasty votive stela depicting a male supplicant before a ithyphallic Amun-Re Kamutef.

²⁴ Some representative examples of nouns related to men and maleness that were denoted by D52 and D53 are, of course, those that refer to male anatomy and its functions such as *hnn* “penis” *bꜣh* “penis” *tꜣm* “foreskin,” *mtwt* “semen,” *wsꜣt* “urine,” as well as those that denote a person as male or in a male role such as *tꜣy* “man,” and *hj* “husband.”

²⁵ Some representative examples of verbs denoting creative action and processes that were determined by D52 and D53 include *bnn* “beget” or “become erect,” *wꜣt* “beget,” and *stj* “impregnate.”

²⁶ Some representative examples of verbs denoting sexual actions that were determined by D52 and D53 or the D52/N41 combination are *hd* “to make sexual excitation,” *dꜣdꜣ* or *dd* “to be amorous or make love,” *nk* “to copulate,” and *hꜣ* “to rape.”

female genitalia and used in feminine words like *hmt* “wife” . This later writing of *tzj* explicitly shows that part of being a male was to copulate with women.

Similarly, the term *hj* for “husband”  was generally determined by the erect penis D52. This usage, again, suggests that part of a husband’s role was to be virile and copulate with and impregnate his wife.

“I Am a Woman Like You”

In addition to these common symbols of male creative power and virility, New Kingdom literature suggests that the vigor and handsomeness of men was also an important part of masculinity and that these qualities incited sexual advances by women. In *The Tale of the Two Brothers*, the younger brother Bata’s physical attractiveness causes his brother’s wife to attempt to bribe him to participate in an illicit affair:

Then she [spoke to] him saying: “There is [great] strength in you. I see your vigor daily,” and she desired to know him as a man. She got up, took hold of him, and said to him: “Come, let us spend an hour lying together. It will be good for you; I will make fine clothes for you.”²⁷

Similarly, in *The Tale of Truth and Falsehood*, the main female character in the story saw Truth lying blind in a thicket and “she desired him very much, for she saw that he was [handsome] in all his [body].” Therefore, she invited Truth into her house and “He slept with her that night and knew her with the knowledge of a man and she conceived a son that night.”²⁸ In both cases, the women are drawn

²⁷ Translation of *The Tale of the Two Brothers* from M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 204-205.

²⁸ Translation of *Truth and Falsehood* from *ibid.*, 212.

to the men because of their physical beauty, and due to it, desire to engage in sexual affairs with them.


Because creative power was assigned to men, infertility, too, could be regarded as a male issue. The inability to beget children was something for which a man could be insulted, and it also allowed his masculinity to be called into question. In a text from Deir el Medina, we find that a man is disparaged in a letter from a fellow villager because of his lack of ability to father a child. The letter states: "Indeed, you are not able to make your wife pregnant like your fellow."²⁹ Additionally, if a man was unfortunate enough to lose his penis, he quite clearly lost his manhood. In *The Tale of the Two Brothers*, when Bata's older brother's wife accuses him of beating her after he refuses to sleep with her, Bata cuts off his own penis. In doing this he not only "grew weak and became feeble" but later tells his own wife "I am a woman like you."³⁰

The removal or defacement of the penis, in combat or in text, was also a way of assigning and/or denoting weakness. In scenes from Ramesses III's funerary temple at Medinet Habu, the reliefs indicate that Egyptian soldiers removed the penises of the enemy dead. This was likely as much a symbolic removal of power from enemy soldiers as it was a bureaucratic counting method. In the Semna Stela of Senwosret III,³¹ which was meant to prohibit the Nubians

²⁹ Author's translation of O. Berlin P 10627.

³⁰ Translation of *The Tale of the Two Brothers* from M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 206-207.

³¹ The Semna Stela is boundary marker that was put up to mark the southern boundary of Egypt during the Middle Kingdom reign of Senwosret III. It is housed in Berlin at the Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, catalog no. 1157.

from passing the southern border of Egypt, the stela renders the word *hm* “coward” not only with the female sign *hm*, but it is determined with a defaced D52 penis . This writing of the determinative expresses the idea not only that a mutilated penis makes one cowardly or unmanly/womanly, but also that by depicting the penis this way it would cause the Nubians to be as they were described.

Because the penis and its ability to become erect and create life was so central, spells were made to both strengthen and protect it. One man, Paybasa, left an inscription at the temple of Amun at Deir el Bahri where he asked Hathor to “grant that his virile member be stronger than any woman.”³² Clearly, the gods could assist men with their virility, and it seems that a childless Deir el Medina scribe named Ramose may have asked for this type of assistance when he dedicated a wooden phallus to Hathor, asking: “Hathor, remember a man at his burial. Grant a duration in your house as a reward for the scribe Ramose, O Golden One – let me receive a compensation of your house as one rewarded.”³³

Aphrodisiac spells, too, were composed to help a man’s penis from being *gnn* “weak” by making it *nht* or *wsr* “strong.”³⁴ Though these texts do not identify

³² Translation of Deir el Bahri graffito 6 from A. Sadek, “An Attempt to Translate the Corpus of Deir el Bahri Hieratic Inscriptions,” *Göttinger Miszellen* 71 (1984); 88.

³³ Translation from J. Romer, *Ancient Lives* (New York: Phoenix, 1984), 28. For an alternate translation see M. Bierbrier, *The Tomb Builders of the Pharaoh* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2003), 32. For an in depth discussion of this text and various translations and interpretations of the text, see G. Pinch, *Votive Offerings to Hathor*, 241-243.

³⁴ Discussed examples include P. BM 10690 in A. Gardiner, *Hieratic Papyri* (London: British Museum Press, 1935), vol. 1, 114-115 and vol. 2, plates 62, 62A, 63

the reason for weakness, it can be assumed that a host of supernatural reasons could cause impotence from the works of malevolent peers, magical practitioners, spirits, or demons. Even in Egypt today, these are all reasons for impotence, and various methods and cures are sought out to protect the male member and to prevent and cure impotence.³⁵

With fear of invisible but potent threats to their masculinity, ancient Egyptian men composed and obtained spells to protect their penises, the seat of their virility. In one Ramesside magical text the spell ensures that the owner's penis is protected from the dead who might enter the penis and render it weak.³⁶ And, it would not be surprising if other spells and prescriptions for issues with the lower back existed for men. With the belief that sperm originated in the spine it does not seem impossible that the any one of the amulets that stood for parts of the backbone, like the *djed* pillar, could have been used for such a spell or ritual.³⁷

Just as impotence in the physical world caused weakness, impotence-inducing magic was an important tool in the afterlife. As chapter 39 from The

and BM EA 10902 from C. Leitz, *Magical and Medical Papyri of the New Kingdom* (London: British Museum Press, 1999), 93.

³⁵ For more on ancient and modern male infertility in Egypt, see "Fatherhood and Fish: Male Impotence," in N. Hansen, "Motherhood in the Mother of the World: Continuity and Change of Reproductive Concepts and Practices in Egypt from Ancient to Modern Times" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2006), 140-165.

³⁶ See C1, p.14-15 in A. Gardiner's *Theban Ostraca, 1-16* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1913).

³⁷ For more on the role of the back and its representative amulets and Egyptian magic, see again C. Schwabe, J. Adams, and C. Hodge, "Egyptian Beliefs About the Bull's Spine," 454-462.

Book of the Dead shows, the deceased could act against Apophis with an impotence-inducing spell. The deceased is able to conquer Apophis by attacking his virility: “You shall not become erect, you shall not copulate, Oh Apophis, you enemy of Re, opposition is made against you.”³⁸ Thus, in life and death, taking away virility by removing the sexual capacity of the penis was a way to both cause weakness and denote loss of power and masculinity.

It is also clear that male virility and creative power was vital to rebirth and wholeness in the afterlife. Men were most commonly depicted as youthful, and these idealized representations guaranteed that the men remained youthful and potent for their rebirth and eternity. Sexual potency was such an intrinsic and important element to male identity that continued sexual power and prowess in the afterlife was ensured through spells. The ability to copulate, in fact, was so essential that it was included in spells that guaranteed basic bodily functions such as eating food and expelling waste. In Pyramid Text 317 from the tomb of Unis we see that: “Unis will eat with his mouth, Unis will urinate and Unis will copulate with his penis. Unis is lord of semen who takes women from their husbands to the place that Unis likes according to his heart’s fancy.”³⁹

In later periods, funerary spells continued to be included with the deceased to ensure his completeness and continued sexual activity and prowess

³⁸ Translation of Chapter 39 of The Book of the Dead, a spell for repelling a Rerek-snake in the God’s Domain, from R. O. Faulkner, O. Goelet, E. Von Dassow, and J. Wasserman, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth by Day: Being the Papyrus of Any* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998), 104.

³⁹ Translation of Pyramid Text 317, a recitation for becoming Sobek, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 60.

in the afterlife. Coffin Text 198, for example, makes sure that the deceased has what he needs to be functional in the afterlife: “My phallus is on me, it being attached; my anus is on me, it being attached. I eat with my mouth, I defecate with my anus.”⁴⁰ Coffin Text 576 more explicitly imbues the deceased with the ability to keep up his sexual activity:

Copulating by a man in the realm of the dead. My eyes are the lion, my phallus is Babi, I am the Outcast, seed is in my mouth, my head is in the sky, and my head is on earth. I am one having power in my heart, mine is ..., mine are...; I am one who ejaculates when he knits together (*ts=f*); I ejaculate seed as that one and this one. As for a man who shall know this spell, he shall copulate in this land by night and by day and desire shall come to woman beneath him whenever he copulates.⁴¹

Additionally, Coffin Text 619 protects the deceased from losing the ability to copulate with his wife by stating he acts against his enemies “who would take away copulation with my wife from me while he is in being; who would bring my days to an end in death.”⁴² Thus, it is clear that the ability to copulate was essential to both regenerate oneself into afterlife and to enjoy sexual activity. This fact may be underscored by the fact that mummies may have, in some cases, been buried with their mummified penises erect or with stand-in artificial phalli.⁴³

⁴⁰ R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts, Volumes I-III* (Oxford: Aris and Phillips, 2007). Translation of Coffin Text 198, a spell for being well-equipped and provided for in the afterlife, from *Volume I*, 162.

⁴¹ Translation of Coffin Text 576, a spell enabling copulation in the realm of the dead, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts II*, 181.

⁴² Translation of Coffin Text 619, a spell for making a clear path in the spiritual realm, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts II*, 202.

⁴³ K. Myśliwiec, *Eros on the Nile* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 9. For an argument for Tut being buried with his penis erect, see N. Reeves, *The Complete*

“She Is a Fertile Field for Her Lord”

Though men were imbued with creative power, women were vital to spurring and nurturing creation. Therefore, an Egyptian woman’s fertility was expressed through both her ability to incite arousal and creative action in her sexual partner as well as in her ability to house, bear, and nurture her children. Just as male virility was an integral aspect of masculinity in ancient Egypt, a woman’s fertility was a vital part of her feminine identity.

In the mythic world, more than one goddess embodied the feminine ideal of stimulator and nurturer of creation. The sky goddess Nut was depicted as a young woman whose naked body stretched out over her brother, the earth god, Geb. By the inclusion of his erection in compositions of the pair in funerary papyri, one can see how her idealized feminine form literally compels Geb to sexual and creative action.⁴⁴ Their initial attraction was so powerful, in fact, that their father Shu had to separate them in order that Nut could bear her divine children.⁴⁵ As the feminine sky, Nut constantly compelled the male earth to creative action.⁴⁶ Nut also acted as a sexual stimulant for the sun god Re, to whom she was both consort and mother. As sexual partner, her feminine beauty

Tutankhamun: The King, The Tomb, The Royal Treasure (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 116-117.

⁴⁴ For a representative depiction of this type, see the funerary papyri of Tamen, from the Third Intermediate Period, British Museum EA 10008.3.

⁴⁵ See Coffin Text 76 and 80.

⁴⁶ For more on the role of Nut see S. Hollis, “Women of Ancient Egypt and the Sky Goddess Nut,” *Journal of American Folklore* 100, no. 398 (1987): 497-498 and A. M. Roth, “Father Earth, Mother Sky,” 195.

caused Re to be able to impregnate her with himself each night; as mother, she bore him every morning.⁴⁷ Invoked in texts, painted on and within the lids of coffins, and on the ceilings of the tombs of pharaohs, she also served this dual role for the deceased.⁴⁸

Hathor, similarly, was both mother and creative fuel for the gods. Her name *ḥwt-ḥr* “house of Horus,” literally points to her role as mother of Horus,⁴⁹ and she took on the role of mother and/or nurse to both kings and the deceased.⁵⁰ Her role as mother translated into the mortal realm, where she was called upon to aid in the birth of women. Her sexual power is clearly demonstrated when the sun god Re becomes petulant and non-responsive during the court case of Horus and Seth; Hathor raises her dress and exposes

⁴⁷ For a discussion of this process see J. Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, 172-174 and J. Allen, *Genesis in Ancient Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* (San Antonio: Van Siclen Books for Yale Egyptological Seminar, Yale University, 1998), 5-6.

⁴⁸ Nut is associated with both the regeneration of the deceased and described as the coffin as early as the Pyramid Texts. Her association with the coffin is clear in utterance 364, a spell for the king’s resurrection, where it is said “mother Nut in her name as sarcophagus.” Translation of Pyramid Text 364 from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford: Aris and Phillips, 1973), 119. Nut commonly appears on and in coffins through Egyptian history, and excellent examples of Nut bearing the sun come from the tombs of New Kingdom pharaohs, and can be seen in the astronomical ceilings of the tombs of Seti I, Ramesses IV, and VI. For more on Nut’s role see A. Piankoff, “The Sky Goddess Nut and the Night Journey of the Sun,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 20 (1934): 57-61.

⁴⁹ L. Troy, *Patterns of Queenship in Ancient Egyptian Myth and History* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1986), 31.

⁵⁰ Hathor was regarded as mother to the earthly king as early as the Old Kingdom and she is depicted in a variety of forms nursing the king and the royal and non-royal deceased through the majority of Egyptian history. In her role as nurturer, she could appear in human, bovine, or tree form.

her genitals to reinvigorate him.⁵¹ In her role as a goddess of love and sexuality, young Egyptian men and women in New Kingdom love poetry appealed to Hathor to bring the objects of their desire to them.⁵² Findings from her cult sites show that supplicants also offered a plethora of stelae, cloths, and other items – including male and female genitalia – in hopes of love, fertility, and successful childbirth.⁵³

Like Egyptian goddesses, an important part of mortal women's identities were rooted in their reproductive roles and actions. Like Isis, the archetypal wife and mother, "Who jubilated, joined her brother, Raised the weary one's inertness, Received the seed, bore the heir, Raised the child in solitude, His abode unknown,"⁵⁴ Egyptian women would have been responsible for both compelling their husbands to sexual action and nurturing the products of their sexual unions in both the mortal realm and in the afterlife. Since it is clear that the height of a woman's sexual potency, like a man's, was in young adulthood, it is not surprising that couples would have married young. It is clear from Egyptian

⁵¹ For this episode in *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*, see M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 216.

⁵² For example in Chester Beatty I, stanza five, reads "I praise the Golden, I worship her majesty, I extol the Lady of Heaven; I give adoration to Hathor, Laudations to my Mistress! I called to her, she heard my plea, She sent my mistress to me; She came by herself to see me, O great wonder that happened to me! I was joyful exulting, elated, When they said: 'See, she is here!' As she came, the young men bowed, Out of great love for her. I make devotions to my goddess, That she grant me my sister as gift; Three days now I have prayed to her name, Five days since she went from me!" Translation from M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 184.

⁵³ For a comprehensive survey of votive offerings to Hathor, see G. Pinch, *Votive Offerings to Hathor*. For photos of male and female genitalia votives see plates 52 and 53.

⁵⁴ Translation of *The Hymn to Osiris* from M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 83.

literature and art that women were considered most beautiful and sexually effective in their early years. In Papyrus Westcar, when King Snefru becomes bored and requires entertainment, he asks for beautiful young women, those who were “shapely of their bodies” who had not “been opened in childbirth” to come and row for him.⁵⁵

Egyptian women, goddesses and mortal alike, were most commonly rendered in depictions and statuary with tight-fitting clothing that drew attention to their slender forms, with the high breasts and long dark hair of youth. Loaded with erotic imagery, material culture items such as mirrors, spoons, and cosmetic pots drew attention to female reproductive body parts.⁵⁶ Figurines of naked or scantily clothed young women were likely imbued with magical potency for varying functions in rituals carried out in both the domestic and temple spheres.⁵⁷

Evidence from the funerary realm suggests that both the sexually stimulating and nurturing actions that women provided in the physical realm were also essential to the facilitation of creative action and rebirth for their husbands and sons.⁵⁸ Women were depicted in a way, through visual symbols, that was

⁵⁵ Translation of Papyrus Westcar from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 220.

⁵⁶ G. Robins, “Dress, Undress, and the Representations of Fertility and Potency in New Kingdom Egyptian Art,” in *Sexuality in Ancient Art*, ed. N. Kampen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 27-40.

⁵⁷ For discussions of these types of figures and their varied uses as fertility, healing, and apotropaic objects see G. Pinch, *Votive Offerings to Hathor*; E. Waraksa, *Female Figurines from the Mut Precinct: Context and Ritual Function* (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2009); and E. Teeter, *Baked Clay Figurines and Votive Beds from Medinet Habu* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010).

⁵⁸ Though this female role has been discussed in scholarship mostly in relation to the rebirth of the male deceased, A. M. Roth in “Father Earth, Mother Sky,” notes the

stimulating for the tomb owners. Depicted in heavy wigs, with flowers, diaphanous gowns, and often near their children, women, including men's wives, and mothers, were symbols of fertility, sexual action, and the creation that occurred through the union of male and female.⁵⁹ Additionally, it is clear from iconography and inscriptions that both tombs and coffins were regarded as figurative wombs meant to house the deceased prior to rebirth.⁶⁰









With such a focus on female sexual potency, it is not surprising that a great deal of interest would have been taken in a woman's ability to conceive and bear children. Although the life cycle of a woman's fertility was marked by menarche, menstrual periods, and menopause, the Egyptians had only a limited understanding of the female reproductive system. Linguistic data shows that while the main elements of the female reproductive system were known, some vital parts and their functions went unnoticed, or, at least, seem to be unnoted.

As Sir Alan Gardiner noted, the hieroglyph for the "female organ" N41 that is used in words to denote the term "woman," is most often designated by the

ability of the female deceased to become her own Osiris. And, K. Cooney in "The Problem of Female Rebirth in New Kingdom Egypt: The Fragmentation of the Female Individual in Her Funerary Equipment" in *Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt*, ed. C. Graves-Brown (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2008), 1-25, further delves into the issue of women's rebirth and the way in which it may have been ideologically reconciled in female tomb iconography and equipment in the New Kingdom.

⁵⁹ For an overview of sexual symbolism in tombs see G. Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187-190 and L. Meskell, "Re-em(bed)ding Sex," 255-256. For more specific discussions on sexuality and sexual regeneration through tomb depiction and figures, see G. Robins, "Ancient Egyptian Sexuality," 61-72 and C. Desroches-Noblecourt, "Concubines du Mort," 7-47.

⁶⁰ For a discussion the return to the womb for the rebirth of the deceased see J. Assmann's *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, 164-176.

sign N41 .⁶¹ This sign, a well full of water, symbolically stands as a type of visual euphemism for the vagina,⁶² which was conceived of as a vessel and could also be designated by the term *k3t*. N41 , like the penis D52  and D53  for men, is used in words that have to do with women and their roles. The sign N41 is used in the term *hmt*   for “wife” or “woman,” as well as in the words *hmt* and *idt*  , terms for “uterus.” Although it is not entirely clear, another term, *mwt rmt* “mother of mankind,” may have been used to refer to the uterus.⁶³ The uterus was appropriately understood to be in the lower belly of the woman and to hold the child in gestation, but it seems that the Egyptians may have believed the uterus could be reached through a woman’s vagina or, possibly, through her mouth.⁶⁴ They may have also believed that the uterus could move throughout the body, causing ailments.⁶⁵


⁶¹ A. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar: Being an Introduction to the Study of Hieroglyphs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 456.

⁶² T. Hare, *ReMembering Osiris, Number, Gender and the Word in Ancient Egyptian Representational Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 137.

⁶³ *mwt rmt* has been translated as both “uterus” and “placenta.” For a discussion of terminology related to women’s reproductive system see A. Bednarski, “Hysteria Revisited: Women’s Public Health in Ancient Egypt,” *Current Research in Egyptology 2000* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2000), 12-13 and J. Nunn, *Ancient Egyptian Medicine*, 47.

⁶⁴ The fertility tests of Kahun 27, 28, 30, Papyrus Carlsberg VIII, paragraph IV, and Berlin 193 and 194, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, all seem to suggest a clear passage from the vagina to the mouth or nose meant a woman was fertile. And, insemination from swallowing also appears in *The Tale of the Two Brothers*. This episode will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

⁶⁵ For a discussion of wandering uteri see A. Bednarski, “Hysteria Revisited, Women’s Public Health in Ancient Egypt,” 11-18 and R. Suvorov, “The Kahun Papyrus in

Interestingly, the sign that was used to represent the uterus, F45 , is a bicornate bovine uterus. As with the male reproductive system, the Egyptian understanding of the female reproductive system may have come from observing animals, most specifically cows. The association of cow and human female reproductive organs is not surprising considering that from the earliest times the Egyptians worshipped their mother and fertility goddesses, such as Bat, Nut, and Hathor, in the form of divine cows.

In addition to the uterus, other visible parts of the female anatomy were identified, including the vagina, which could be referred to by the term *kzt*, euphemistically as *iwf* “flesh,” and more generally by *kns* “pubic region.” The cervix was appropriately called *r m hmt* “the mouth of the uterus.” However, it does not seem that the Egyptians understood the role of the fallopian tubes or ovaries. However, information from literature may point to some ideas of potential fertility existing in women prior to conception.

In *A Dispute Between a Man and His Ba*, a man who founders in his boat with his family in a crocodile-infested lake does not feel bad for the death of his wife, who would have no afterlife due to her body being eaten by a crocodile, but he did “grieve for her children broken in the egg, who have seen the face of the crocodile before they have lived.”⁶⁶ It is possible that the woman was pregnant,

Context: The Floating Uterus,” *Current Research in Egyptology 2004* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2000), 138-146.

⁶⁶ Translation of *A Dispute Between a Man and His Ba* from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 165. For an alternate but similar translation and a discussion of this segment of the text see H. Goedicke, *The Report About the Dispute of a Man with His Ba* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 213, and 133-139.

as children in the womb could be called the *swḥt* “egg” or referred to as *m swḥt* “in the egg.” But since the text notes the children as plural, it could denote a state in the woman prior to pregnancy. Though it is almost certain that the Egyptians did not know about the existence of the microscopic eggs that issued from the ovaries, the text does seem to suggest the idea that women had potential “children” or a component of future children within their wombs before conception.

“Determining a Woman Who Will Conceive”

Though infertility could be a male issue, some Egyptian women would have had difficulty or been incapable of conceiving, and still others could have become infertile due to reproductive trauma and/or age. As both men and women were often married more than once due to divorce or the death of spouses,⁶⁷ infertility in both men and women would likely have been an identifiable phenomenon. Although supernatural causes surely would have been blamed for most cases of infertility,⁶⁸ and these would have been addressed through magical and medico-magical means, it does seem that observable physical attributes could be noted as indicative of infertility.

⁶⁷ For more on marriage and remarriage patterns in the village of Deir el Medina see J. Toivari-Viitala, *Women at Deir el Medina*, 84-90.

⁶⁸ Though the ancient sources do not lend information on supernatural causes for infertility, it is very likely that the actions and thoughts of other villagers, spirits of the deceased, and other demons would have been regarded as potential threats to fertility. For an overview of the ancient beliefs and possible modern parallels in reproductive culture, including those for infertility, see again N. Hansen, “Motherhood in the Mother of the World,” 2006.

The Kahun Gynecological Papyrus⁶⁹ has a series of seven cases, numbered 26-32, for “determining a woman who will conceive from one who will not.” A number of these texts suggest that fertility can be determined in women by the observation of various parts and attributes of their bodies. Kahun 26 suggests that by examining the vessels in the breast of a woman, you could tell if she would be able to bear a child.

Recognition of one who will be pregnant as opposed to one who won't be pregnant. You shall [put] fresh oil on [.....]; then you shall [examine] her. If you find the vessels of her breasts firm (*h3š3*), then you shall say about it: this means giving birth. If you find them (the vessels) limp (*knkn*), then you shall say about it: she will hesitate to give birth. If, however, you find them (the breasts) like skin [.....].⁷⁰

Berlin 196 gives a similar test, and suggests that the practitioner should test the women early in the morning.⁷¹ This version of the test states not only can you determine a woman's ability to conceive, but also the type of birth she would have.⁷² Since the veins in the breast darken and become more prominent in pregnant women, it is possible the veins of the breast came to be examined to

⁶⁹ For complete translations of this and other texts from Kahun in English see M. Collier and S. Quirke, *The UCL Lahun Papyri: Religious, Legal, Mathematical and Medical* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2004). For the German, see H. von Deines, H. Grapow, and W. Westendorf, *Übersetzung der medizinischen Texte. Grundriss der Medizin der alten Ägypter IV* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958), 266-289.

⁷⁰ English translation of Kahun 26 from the German of H. von Deines, H. Grapow, and W. Westendorf, *Grundriss IV*, 272.

⁷¹ English translation of Berlin 196 from the German, *ibid.*, 274.

⁷² The rest of the text reads: “if you find her vessels nicely fresh, without [them] being caved in: [that means] a happy (*hnp*) birth; do you find them (the vessels) caved in like skin....her body: that means a difficult birth (*bnd*); if you find her with them (the vessels) being fresh, <only> at night <while> examining (*m33*) her, then she will hesitate (*wdf*) to give birth.” English translation from the German of H. von Deines, H. Grapow, and W. Westendorf, *Grundriss IV*, 275.

determine fertility. If this was the motivation, it seems that those women whose veins were more pronounced, like a pregnant woman's, were regarded as more fertile, and possibly more suited for labor than those women who had less visible veins.

Another area that could be examined to determine fertility was the eyes of a woman. Kahun 31 seems to suggest that there is some connection between the eyes and the reproductive system, and it asserts that if one examined and perceived trouble in a woman's eyes she will "never give birth."⁷³ The Carlsberg Papyrus was more explicit, stating that one should make the woman "stand in the door frame," one assumes to get a good well-lit look, and if the woman's eyes were dark, "one of them like an Asiatic, the other like a southerner, then she shall not give birth."⁷⁴

The examination of a woman's *mnjz*, too, could predict fertility. Both Kahun 29 and 32 state that a woman's reaction to placing a finger on her *mnjz* could determine if she was fertile or pregnant. Though this test again appears in the Berlin Papyrus with additional instructions, it is unclear what part of the body *mnjz* stands for, but it may have something to do with the health and strength of a woman's arm.⁷⁵

⁷³ English translation of Kahun 31 from the German, *ibid.*, 274.

⁷⁴ English translation of Carlsberg VIII, paragraph VI from the German, *ibid.*, 275.

⁷⁵ *mnjz* is determined by an arm in Kahun 32 and Berlin 197 and by the piece of flesh in Kahun 29. The use of these determinative suggest that the word may designate a woman's arm, or a certain part of a woman's arm. Again, if pregnancy signs were used to determine general fertility, it is possible that the practitioner was examining the fullness of the woman's veins in her arm or her pulse, both of which can be more prominent in pregnancy.

Other fertility tests, which seem to attempt to determine if the pathways to the woman's womb were clear, were also carried out. Though these texts are difficult to interpret, they may imply that the Egyptians believed there was a passageway from the vagina to the mouth or nose. If smells and fluids could travel from the vagina up to the mouth or nose, a woman had childbearing potential. The test in Kahun 28 suggests that the vaginal test should be carried out with an onion: "You shall put an onion bulb...into the abdomen [...]. Then you shall say about it: she will give birth. If you find nothing [...] in her nose, [then she will] never [give birth]." ⁷⁶ A later, almost identical version of the text from Papyrus Carlsberg uses the same testing method." ⁷⁷ These texts seem to suggest that a clear passage from the reproductive organs to the mouth meant a clear passage for conception, and the opposite, obstruction, meant infertility.

Kahun 27 similarly suggests that an open passage from the vagina to the mouth indicates fertility, and a closed passage, infertility. In this test, the woman is fumigated through her vagina, and if she vomits, it indicates she is fertile. To carry out the test:

You shall make her sit on the floor that has been covered with the sediment (*t3h.t*) from sweet beer, on top of it (the sediment) has been put flour (?) from dates. [...] vomiting, then she will give birth. As far as the number of times that vomit comes out of her mouth is concerned, [that means] the number of births. [If, however] she doesn't [vomit], then she will never give birth. ⁷⁸

⁷⁶ English translation of Kahun 28 from the German of H. von Deines, H. Grapow, and W. Westendorf, *Grundriss IV*, 273.

⁷⁷ English translation of Papyrus Carlsberg VIII, paragraph IV from the German, *ibid.*

⁷⁸ English translation of Kahun 27 from the German, *ibid.*, 273.

It seems again that an open reproductive tract allows the fumigation to reach the stomach, and then it comes forth from mouth in the form of vomit. Additionally, the number of times the woman vomits is believed to predict the number of pregnancies that she would have. Though this test may have looked for openness, it seems possible too that if the Egyptians recognized morning sickness in pregnant women, they could have believed that a smell that would normally make a pregnant woman vomit, a sweet- smelling concoction, would also cause sickness in a fertile woman.

In the later Berlin Papyrus, similar fertility tests are prescribed to determine the fertility of a woman. Yet in these texts, the woman drinks an elixir and is supposed to vomit if she is fertile; if she is not, the elixir will be emitted from her body as flatulence. Both cases 193 and 194 call for the creation of an elixir that incorporates both ground watermelon and the milk of a woman who has borne a male child. In these tests, the elixir can be ingested by mouth or injected into the vagina.

Berlin 193


[Recognizing] a woman who will give birth, as opposed to a woman who will [not] give birth. Watermelon (*bddw-k3*-plant); shall be ground, shall be incorporated into the milk of one who has given birth to a boy; shall be made into an elixir, [it] shall be swallowed by the woman. If she vomits, then she will give birth. If she gets flatulence, she will never give birth.⁷⁹

Berlin 194

What <else> is said about it as a different remedy. Watermelon (*bddw-k3*-plant) shall be incorporated into the milk of one who has given birth to a son, shall be poured into her vulva. If she vomits, then she will give birth. If she gets flatulence, she will never give birth.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ English translation of Berlin 193 from the German, *ibid.*, 274.

⁸⁰ English translation of Berlin 193 from the German, *ibid.*

The prescribed elixir that was called for was made of two potent ingredients. The first, the *bddw-k3*-plant, watermelon, was mythologically said to have originated from the seed of Seth when he emitted semen onto the ground in his form as a bull. Rendered as , this plant, its seeds, and extracts, may have symbolized fertility, given its associations with the positive aspects of Seth, his semen, and possibly bulls and/or the male *k3*. Since watermelon seeds were found in the tomb of Tutankhamun,⁸¹ this plant may have also had symbolic fertility meaning for the dead and the afterlife. Second, the elixir called for the milk of a woman who had borne a male child. Like Isis's milk to Horus, this milk may have been believed to have special potency and been a symbol of female fertility and life-giving ability. Since the woman had borne a male child and was feeding that child the same milk, the milk, too, could have imbued the concoction, like the watermelon, with male essence. It is also possible that this combination of items caused the elixir to look like semen, and thereby, was believed to test the woman's reaction to semen.

Again, these tests seem to attempt to ascertain woman's reproductive tract is open, either from the vagina, or from the mouth. That an infertile woman would pass the substance as gas may have suggested that her tract was not functioning properly or open in the appropriate way. Or possibly again, the sweet-smelling concoction could have been prepared to see if it was nausea inducing to a fertile woman.

⁸¹ N. Hepper, *Pharaoh's Flowers: The Botanical Treasures of Tutankhamun* (Chicago: KWS, 2009), 56.

Another test from the Berlin Papyrus, which is noted as a “different way of determining,” is most curious when it states:

Berlin 195

A different [way of] determining (*m33*) [that] a woman will not give birth. [...]. Then one shall cense her (the woman) with hippopotamus dung. If she eliminates (*wsš?*) urine with (*hr*) either feces or flatulence at the same time, then she will give birth. If it is not the case (?), then she will not give birth, for something opposes it (?).⁸²

In the most basic sense, it could be that if the woman was not affected by the censing her reproductive tract was closed, or something “opposes it.” Yet, the type of fumigation, the dung of the hippopotamus,⁸³ and the woman’s reaction, may have had symbolic importance. Mythologically, the male hippopotamus was associated with the god Seth. It is possible that the woman rejecting Seth, in one of his chaos inducing forms, meant she had childbearing potential and/or the ability to ward off miscarriage, also associated with Seth. On the other hand, the female hippopotamus Taweret was a protectress of women, especially during pregnancy and childbirth. Perhaps if a woman did not react to the concoction that was imbued with Taweret’s protective powers, i.e. “something opposes it,” she would not have a successful time getting pregnant.

In addition to fumigations and drinks, Kahun 30, too, looks for the openness of the reproductive tract through the conjuration of a substance within the woman’s body:

⁸² English translation of Berlin 195 from the German of H. von Deines, H. Grapow, and W. Westendorf, *Grundriss IV*, 274.

⁸³ It is quite possible that the hippopotamus dung that is called for here may not be actual dung, but a magically potent paste that, looking like or associated with hippopotamus dung, had mythologically charged properties.

A different means <of recognition>. This calf of Horus [.....]. I am on/with [...] Horus, and conversely. May you descend to the place at which you[This] following utterance shall be spoken [.....]. If <it> discharges from her nose, then she will give birth. If <it> discharges from her vagina, then she will give birth. If, however, <it> [.....], [then] she will never give birth.⁸⁴

This is one of the most interesting tests. It conjures a substance from the body of the woman, maybe a type of fluid, which is brought forth from the nose or vagina by means of an amulet that takes the form of a calf.⁸⁵ This test suggests that by using an amulet of the calf, one could call forth either a necessary fluid to creating life, or perhaps, even the essence of a child that was believed to exist within the woman, from her open reproductive tract. If this substance could not be conjured, however, it may have implied that the fluid did not exist or that her tract was blocked, and hence, she would never be able to give birth.

Though it is difficult to explicate the cultural ideas and understandings that motivated these tests, including their ingredients, methods, and results, the number of known tests shows that the ability to test a woman's fertility was important enough to be recorded in gynecological treatises. Assuredly village women had a variety of means to determine and spur fertility, and unfortunately, we cannot know if the tests in these treatises were carried out commonly or only in more extreme situations of arrested fertility. Interestingly, to date, no parallel fertility tests for Egyptian men have been found. Though, as we have seen, men could appeal to gods to assure strength, and protect their penises through spells,

⁸⁴ English translation of Kahun 30 from the German of H. von Deines, H. Grapow, and W. Westendorf, *Grundriss IV*, 273.

⁸⁵ For a New Kingdom calf amulet, see C. Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1994), 61.

these tests indicate that a woman's ability to bear children was of extreme cultural importance.

Sexual creative action started and sustained the Egyptian world, both on the larger cosmic level and within the family. Both looking to and reflected in mythic gender and sexual roles, a woman's ability to incite creative action and a man's ability to create were central to their identities. Not surprisingly, with the importance of sex and fertility to identity, gendered language and practices emerged, as did prayers, spells, and tests to encourage, protect, and determine fertility. If an Egyptian woman and man were lucky, they, like sensuous Isis and virile Osiris, would be blessed with fecundity and able to create an heir and family.

CHAPTER 3
“His Seed is Within My Womb:”
Understanding Conception and the Formation of the Child

Your sister Isis has come to you, aroused [for] love of you. You have put her on your phallus so that your seed might emerge in her.¹

See him, you gods, the god-like spirit whom Osiris has made into his son, whom Isis has made into her child.²

When Isis facilitated Osiris’s rebirth, they wasted no time conceiving an heir. Sometimes depicted as a falcon hovering over Osiris, though literally understood as the goddess in her anthropomorphic form, Osiris implanted Isis with his seed through intercourse. After the sexual activity, Horus was conceived. From his father, Horus received his *hꜣ*, or spirit. And, while in her womb, his mother Isis formed and nurtured him.

The Egyptians understood that a sexual union was necessary for conception. Though a few episodes of exceptional means of conception are present in myth and literature, in most instances, coitus between a man and a woman, whether gods, mortals, or some combination of the two, was the most common way that a child was conceived. Although explicit references to sexual intercourse are sparse, even when couched in euphemisms and symbolic depictions, it is clear that coitus was generally understood as a prerequisite for conception. Additionally, when an Egyptian man and woman set out to create a

¹ Translation of Pyramid Text 366, a resurrection text, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 81.

² Translation of Coffin Text 33, a spell for becoming Horus, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, 22.

life, they believed that both parties contributed to the creation and formation of the child, but not without a little help from the gods.

"The Splinter Flew"

The exceptional stories of the creation gods and men in myth and literature, even when occurring through extraordinary methods of conception, tell a great deal about the ways in which the Egyptians believed life was created. As we have seen, Atum created Shu and Tefnut by a sexual union with his female hand³ and in one version of the story, he even used his mouth as a womb to gestate and bear his children as spittle.⁴ Even in cases where the methods of conception and birth are not biologically accurate, the episodes tend to retain both masculine and the feminine elements and reproductive roles. When Re impregnates his mother Nut with himself, for example, his body acts as sperm, and her mouth as entrance to the womb.⁵ Though this seems unusual, it follows the real world Egyptian pattern of conception of female stimulation, male creative action, and female birth giving. And, though the impregnation occurs through the

³ See Pyramid Text 527.

⁴ See Pyramid Text 600.

⁵ The swallowing of the sun by Nut is referenced in Pyramid Text 563, a lustration text, where the king requests that she *j'm* "swallow" him, but made most explicit by the depiction/text combination in the celestial ceilings of the royal New Kingdom tombs of Ramesses IV where the image of Nut swallowing the sun disk is accompanied by hieroglyphs that narrate the process: "The majesty of this god enters her mouth." For more on this scene, see A. Piankoff, "The Sky-Goddess Nut and the Night Journey of the Sun," 57.

mouth, as we have seen, the Egyptians may have thought that there was a path to the womb from either the mouth or the vagina.⁶

In The Tale of the Two Brothers, another woman is able to conceive through her mouth. In the story, Bata loses his wife to the pharaoh and he goes to the palace to exact revenge. He comes to the palace as a bull, and when his former wife learns of his presence, she has him sacrificed. He assumes a second form as a set of Persea trees, and when the wife of the pharaoh learns of this, she requests that the trees be cut down. But, as the trees are being felled, “a splinter flew and entered the mouth of the Lady. She swallowed it, and in a moment she became pregnant...Many days after this, she gave birth to a son.”⁷ Though sperm is not involved, the essence of a man, a splinter in this case, impregnates a woman. Again here, the mouth acts as an entrance to the womb.

Statements from funerary literature that present an exceptional conception and/or rebirth for the deceased are also useful for understanding ideas of conception, as these spells imply that the antithesis to the deceased’s “exceptional” conception and rebirth was a common, or regular, earthly conception and birth. In the early cases from the Pyramid Texts the pharaoh is designated as spawn of the gods: “Your father who begot you is not among mankind; your mother who bore you is not among mankind.”⁸ Therefore, though

⁶ For examples see Kahun 27, 28, 30, Carlsberg VIII, paragraph IV and Berlin 193 and 194.

⁷ Translation of the Tale of the Two Brothers from M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 210.

⁸ Author’s translation of Pyramid Text 374, a spell to allow the king to be reborn. This phrase appears frequently in funerary texts. For a representative example see

the pharaoh was conceived and born by and like a god in the afterlife, others who had normal conceptions and births were conceived through a human father and birthed by a human mother. Later versions of this type of statement from the Coffin Texts also show the deceased as exceptional. In Coffin Text 76 the deceased, who is likened to Shu, says, “I was not built in the womb, I was not knit together in the egg, I was not conceived, but Atum spat me out in the spittle of his mouth together with my sister Tefnut.”⁹ Again, this text implies that the antithesis to the deceased’s godly creation and birth was the typical conception, gestation, and birth of an earthly being. These spells reveal that the Egyptians understood a typical conception as one beginning with the sexual coupling of a man and a woman, and afterward the conceived child was formed in the woman’s womb and birthed by her.

“The Knowledge of a Man”

Though a few episodes of exceptional conception occur in myth and literature, for the most part, conception was described as occurring through sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. Though commonly couched in visual and literary euphemisms, references to the relationship between copulation and conception can be pooled from textual evidence.

It is clear that in most life-creating scenarios, sexual intercourse was thought of as a necessary precursor to conception. The king, who often noted his

Pyramid Text 374. Other similar examples also occur in *Pyramid Text 466, 675* and *Coffin Text 317*.

⁹ Translation of Coffin Text 76, a spell for joining the barque of Re, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, 77-78.

earthly parents, could also be described as one who was conceived through the sexual intercourse either between a god and goddess, or between a male god and the queen mother. This relationship between the king and his divine essence, whether passed from his earthly father or directly from the god, is implied in his title “Son of Re,” a part of the titulary that appears in the Old Kingdom and continues to be used throughout Egyptian history.¹⁰ In the New Kingdom, the divine birth myths on temples, names such as Ramesses, and statements like those by Amenhotep II on the Sphinx Stela at Giza which call the king “Re’s heir, [Amun’s son], shining seed, Divine flesh’s holy egg”¹¹ further stress this relationship.

In literature a variety of episodes employ euphemisms for sexual intercourse that stress the necessity of sexual action for conception. These instances clearly reveal the relationship between coitus and conception. In *The Doomed Prince*, a pharaoh prays to the gods for a son. The gods hear his prayers and “That night, he slept with his wife and she [became] pregnant.”¹² It is clear that after “sleeping” together with his wife, she was able to become pregnant and bear a child. Similarly, in the tales of Setne I and Setne II, “sleeping

¹⁰ The title “Son of Re” is first used by the 4th dynasty pharaoh Djedefre. He is also the first to incorporate the name of the god Re in his own name. This new development in the king’s titulary and name marks the rise of the cult of the sun in the Old Kingdom.

¹¹ Translation of the Great Sphinx Stela at Giza from M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 40-41.

¹² Translation of *The Doomed Prince* from *ibid.*, 200.

with” or “laying beside” one’s wife leads to conception. In Setne I when the brother-sister pair Ahwere and Naneferkaptah marry, Ahwere states:

I was taken as a wife to the house of Naneferkaptah... Naneferkaptah made holiday with me and he entertained all Pharaoh's household. He slept with me that night and found me [pleasing. He slept with] me again and again, and we loved each other. When my time of purification came I made no more purification.¹³

In Setne II there are two episodes of conception, both of which are described as occurring when Setne’s wife Mehusekhe lies down by his side and “receives the fluid of conception.” In the first instance Mehusekhe prays for a child and the gods recommend that she make a concoction of conception. After making and drinking the concoction “She lay down by] the side of her husband [Setne]. She received [the fluid of] conception from him.”¹⁴ This first child, Si-Osire, is actually a reincarnation of Horus, son of Paneshe, who is conceived by imbuing his essence in the concoction Mehusekhe creates and drinks. When Si-Osire later returns to the underworld, Setne and Mehusekhe are riddled with despair from losing their only child. They attempt to conceive again that same night. And, again Mehusekhe was said to “lay down at his side, and she received the fluid of conception from him that night.”¹⁵

In the tale of Truth and Falsehood, not only is the euphemism “to sleep with” employed, but also the narrator notes that after the Lady invited Truth into

¹³ Translation of the Ptolemaic version of the story Setne I from M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: Volume 3: The Late Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 128.

¹⁴ Translation of the Roman version of the story Setne II from M. Lichtheim, *The Late Period*, 138.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

her house “He slept with her that night and knew her with the knowledge of a man.”¹⁶ Like “sleep with” and “to lay down with,” the “knowledge of a man” was an additional snippet that could be employed to further stress that coitus occurred. And, again, after Truth “slept with” and “knew” the lady, “she conceived a son that night.”¹⁷

In funerary literature, we also find episodes where sexual intercourse leads to the creation of a child. Though Isis could be depicted or described as a bird hovering over the deceased Osiris when she conceives Horus, the Pyramid Texts are a bit more explicit on their union. Pyramid Text 366 tells us: “Your sister Isis has come to you, aroused [for] love of you. You have put her on your phallus so that your seed might emerge into her”¹⁸ Similarly, in Pyramid Text 593, Isis “has come to you, [aroused] for love of you, and your seed emerged into her.”¹⁹ Depictions of the union from the New Kingdom temple of Seti I at Abydos further stress the sexual union as Isis, in her form as a kite, is hovering directly over Osiris’s erect penis.²⁰

In another episode of sexual intercourse and conception from the Coffin Texts, the description of the mythic conception of the deceased is a bit more

¹⁶ Translation of the story of Truth and Falsehood from M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 212.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Translation of Pyramid Text 366, a resurrection spell, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 81.

¹⁹ Translation of Pyramid Text 593, a resurrection spell, from *ibid.*, 217.

²⁰ New Kingdom temple of Seti I at Abydos.

descriptive and stresses the erotic element of sexual union. The deceased states: “I am the tempestuous (*kꜣ ḥnnw*) bull, my mother Isis conceived me, and she swooned under the fingers of the Lord of the gods when he broke into her therewith on that day of lifting (*fꜣw*) the mat (*tmꜣ*) in [...] for...”²¹ This text makes clear that the deceased impregnates Isis as the “bull of his mother” and recalls the story of the original conception on the day that “of lifting the mat” during which Isis “swooned under the fingers of the Lord.” This text not only has an erotic element of the sexual encounter between Isis and the god, but also makes a clear reference to sexual intercourse by saying that Isis “swooned” or literally, “was ignorant of her body” when the god “broke into her.”²² Unfortunately, the reference to “lifting the mat” is damaged and unclear. While this part of the text is quite difficult to translate due to the lacuna, it clearly implies a sexual act that leads to the conception of Horus, and by association, the deceased.

“I Have Impregnated the Egg”

While textual evidence makes clear that coitus leads to conception, very little is available on the Egyptian view of the mechanics of conception. The Egyptians observed sperm issue forth from the penis and they likened it to other potent liquid elements such as water and poison. Since water was seen spewing forth, creating and nurturing life, the idea that sperm, specifically, gave life to offspring in the womb is not surprising.²³ Men were understood both as the

²¹ Coffin Text 334, a spell of rebirth, translation from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, 258.

²² Author’s translation of Coffin Text 334, a spell of rebirth.

²³ Also noted by A. M. Roth in “Father Earth, Mother Sky,” 195.

fertilizers in conception and the responsible party in impregnation. In The Great Hymn to Khnum, it is noted that the role of the male member is to beget and the female womb is to conceive. The hymn goes on to say specifically that the role of "The virile member" is "to eject, When it swells between the thighs" and that "the loins" "support the phallus, In the act of begetting."²⁴

Texts from both daily life and the funerary context stress that men were responsible for impregnating women. In one text from Deir el Medina, we have seen that a man secures a wife by "bringing a bundle." However, after he brings the bundle, another man, who is his superior, sleeps with his intended bride. The text goes on to say despite being informed the woman was spoken for: "He went again and he made her pregnant."²⁵ Clearly here, the man is the one responsible for impregnating the woman. Funerary texts, too, reflect this idea, and in Coffin Text 1012 we see the male's role in conception when the deceased is said to be made by his divine father as one who was "created of his seed; you were conceived of his seed."²⁶ Because the male impregnated the "egg," imbuing it with his essence, he of course, by extension, impregnated the woman. This relationship is clear in Pyramid Text 518 when Osiris is called to commend Pepi

²⁴ Translation of Roman version of The Great Hymn to Khnum from M. Lichtheim, *The Late Period*, 113.

²⁵ Papyrus DeM 27, translation from A. McDowell, *Village Life in Ancient Egypt, Laundry Lists and Love Songs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 48-49.

²⁶ Translation of Coffin Text 1012, a spell for not eating feces in the realm of the dead, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts III*, 112.

“like you commended Horus to Isis on the day that you impregnated her.”²⁷

Coffin Text 1017, too, shows that the male deceased stresses his role as creator:

“I have done what brings everything into being... I have impregnated the egg.”²⁸

Though the Egyptians did not understand the biological process by which a woman’s egg is fertilized, it does seem that a notion of dual participation in fertilization existed. Because the Egyptians would have had experience viewing the placenta in mammals (both animal and human), as well as the eggs of reptiles and birds, “eggs,” it seems, were understood as housing offspring in both animals and people. Likely due to these natural observations of placentae and eggs, which came from females, it is possible they believed that the “eggs” that held human offspring were contributed by the mother. However, these were not the microscopic eggs we now know are released by the ovaries.

“I Knit Together the Shape of the God Within the Egg”

After a child was conceived, both the mother and the father contributed to its formation in the womb. As Coffin Text 33 explains to the gods about the deceased, who is likened to the child Horus, “see him, you gods, the god-like spirit whom Osiris has made into his son, whom Isis has made into her child.”²⁹

Men and women each had specific roles in conception: men were responsible for

²⁷ Translation of Pyramid Text 518, a ferryman text, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 160.

²⁸ Translation of Coffin Text 1017, a spell of magic and protection, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts III*, 118.

²⁹ Translation of Coffin Text 33, a spell for becoming Horus, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, 22.

providing the spirit or essence of a child, often in their image, and the mother was responsible for the physical formation of the child.

A variety of texts make clear that a man gave his essence to the formation of a child. As early as the Pyramid Texts, the god Atum is noted as the one who sets his arms around his children Shu and Tefnut: “You put your arms around them as *ka*-arms so that your *ka* might be in them.”³⁰ The children of kings were often bore the title “king’s son of his body” or “king’s daughter of his body.” The Maxims of Ptahhotep also relay this concept, if a bit more clearly. The text states: “He is your son, your *ka* begot him.”³¹ In the case of kings, who were thought to have the essence of their divine fathers in them, their divine nature was often noted. Even the Victory Stela of Piye, a Nubian ruler of Egypt, claims this very Egyptian idea of divine conception: “I was fashioned in the womb, created in the egg of the god! The seed of the god is in me!”³²

Again looking to funerary literature, Coffin Text 32 shows Osiris’s role in the conception of the deceased. In the spell, the deceased, who is likened to Horus, “is your beloved son whom Maat bore and she enfolds him and loves him as your son, as your child of your shape whom you yourself have made.”³³ It is

³⁰ Translation of Pyramid Text 600, a prayer for the king and his pyramid, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 269.

³¹ Translation of the Maxims of Ptahhotep from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 66.

³² Translation of the Victory Stela of King Piye from M. Lichtheim, *The Late Period*, 73.

³³ Translation of Coffin Text 32, a spell for being known in the West, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, 21.

clear that Osiris conveys the child to Maat, and in the role of Isis, she nurtures the child. Osiris contributed his essence to forming his child as he did in Coffin Text 39, where in reference to the divine father, the deceased notes: “As for him who brought me to birth, he has made me into the body of his own flesh, the seed which issues from his phallus.”³⁴

Though the father contributed the essence of the child, the mother was responsible for the physical formation of the child. Isis claims to have molded Horus in her womb. She tells that gods: “I knit together the shape of the god in the egg as my son, who is at the head of the Ennead.”³⁵ In Coffin Texts 328, the deceased makes a similar reference to the role of his divine mother’s womb in his formation:

The god is knit together within the egg; the god is formed and comes into being within the [nest (šš)...], the god is raised up, *Knnh* has formed me, the Watcher has molded me, [...] has conceived me [...], her womb [fashioned] me, my two mothers bore me, [...] they saw her who core the god in me, who knew [me].³⁶

The mother also may have contributed the heart of the child. In Coffin Text 20, when the deceased hopes to regain his heart in the afterlife, it is noted: “there will be given to you your heart which you had from your mother.”³⁷ Similarly, in an

³⁴ Translation of Coffin Text 33, a spell for becoming Horus, from *ibid.*, 32.

³⁵ Author’s translation of Coffin Text 148, a spell for taking shape as a falcon.

³⁶ Translation of Coffin Text 938, a spell for becoming a falcon, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts III*, 78.

³⁷ Translation of Coffin Text 20, a spell for re-establishing one’s original form, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, 11.

instance from New Kingdom Book of the Dead, the deceased is given a spell for controlling his heart to not speak against him:

Chapter for not letting Any's heart create opposition against him in the God's Domain "Oh heart which I had from my mother! O heart which I had from my mother! Oh my heart of my different ages! Do not stand up as a witness against me..."³⁸

"Lo, the Good Son, the Gift of the God"

While the "fluid of conception" and the fashioning womb of the mother were necessary for the conception and the formation of a child, the creation of a child was not an entirely earthly matter - the gods, too, were intimately involved with the creation of a child. Statements in didactic literature such as "Lo, the good son, the gift of the god"³⁹ and "If you are a man of worth and produce a son by the grace of god"⁴⁰ intimate what hymns to gods make clear: though the Egyptians understood the physical process of conception, intrinsically bound in this understanding was also the idea that both sperm and the womb were imbued with life by the gods. The New Kingdom Hymn to the Aten is a fine example of the centrality of the gods to the creation of a family. It states that the Aten is the one that not only gives power to sperm to become a person, but also provides for the child from the womb to birth. The Aten is one:

who makes the seed grow in women, who creates people from sperm;
who feeds the son in the mother's womb, who soothes him to still his

³⁸ Book of the Dead, Chapter 30B, a spell for not letting one's heart create opposition in the God's Domain, translation from R. O. Faulkner et al., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, plate 4.

³⁹ Translation of the Maxims of Ptahhotep from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 76.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

tears, nurse in the womb, giver of breath, to nourish all that he made. When he comes from the womb to breathe on the day of his birth, you open wide his mouth, you supply his needs.⁴¹

The gods were so central to conception that during periods of unrest, they could even be scolded for their role in continuing to imbue the people with the ability to conceive in times of famine and hardship. The Admonitions of Ipuwer note that during the tumultuous time of the First Intermediate period that though “Gone is the gain of abundance of children,” the gods still allow people to conceive and multiply: “Since birth is desired, grief has come and misery is everywhere. So it is and will not pass, while the gods are in their midst. Seed comes forth from mortal women; it is not found on the road.” In the Admonitions, the continued desire for birth and the dearth of food lead to a situation almost unheard of in Egypt, where “Children of nobles are dashed against the walls; infants are put on high ground.” Ipuwer even states “little children” say, “He should not have made me live!” Ipuwer criticizes the god and states “Lo, why does he seek to fashion <men>, when the timid is not distinguished from the violent?” He further suggests that if the god had “had perceived their nature in the first generation, then he would have smitten the evil, stretched out his arm against it, would have destroyed their seed and their heirs.”⁴²

As the gods imbued people with creative and nurturing power, it is not surprising that the Egyptians appealed to the gods with wishes for children,

⁴¹ Translation of the Hymn to the Aten from M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 97-98.

⁴² Translation of the Admonitions of Ipuwer from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 149-163.

especially in the case of male heirs. In more than one piece of Egyptian literature, characters ask the gods for help conceiving male children, and the gods assist the childless couples in conceiving. In the New Kingdom tale of The Doomed Prince, we have seen the pharaoh prayed for a son when none was born to him. The text tells us:

It is said, there once was a king to whom no son had been born. [After a time his majesty] begged a son for himself from the gods of his domain, and they decreed that one should be born to him. That night, he slept with his wife and she [became] pregnant.⁴³

The gods do not impregnate the king's wife. Instead, the gods instill the king with the creative power to both impregnate his wife and engender a male child.

The gods not only had the power to provide the seed of conception to men, but also could offer advice and tonics for women to help them conceive a child. We have already met Mehusekhe, Setne's wife, who wished for a child. Staying overnight in a temple for divine assistance in conception, she receives a recipe for conception from the gods:

[One night] she dreamed that one spoke to her [saying: "Are] you Mehusekhe, [the wife] of Setne, who is lying [there in the temple] so as to receive healing? --- [When tomorrow has come] go to [the place where your husband] Setne bathes. You will find a melon vine grown there. [Break off a branch] with its gourds and grind it. [Make it into] a remedy, put it [in water and drink it]. -- - [you will receive the fluid of conception] from him that [night]." Mehusekhe awoke [from] the dream in which she had seen these things. She acted in accordance with [everything she had been told in the dream. She lay down by] the side of her husband Setne]. She received [the fluid of] conception from him.⁴⁴

⁴³ Translation of The Doomed Prince from M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 200.

⁴⁴ Translation of Setne II from M. Lichtheim, *The Late Period*, 138.

Not only in literature, but also in life, there is clear evidence that people appealed to the gods for assistance with the conception of children. In their homes, it is likely that Egyptians frequently prayed to gods for fertility and children. A bust from the New Kingdom village of Deir el Medina, which at first glance seems to be an ancestor bust, is labeled “Hathor, Lady of the Vulva,”⁴⁵ and it is possible that families prayed to this form of Hathor in their homes for success in conceiving children. Female figurines too, may have played a role in home pleas for fertility and children, and various types of female figurines have been found in domestic contexts from the Middle and New Kingdoms.⁴⁶ Outside of the home, too, it seems that individuals made pleas to divinities for fertility. Temples to Hathor, specifically, both in Egypt and the surrounding areas, had a great multitude of votive figures and cloths dedicated to the goddess in her various forms.⁴⁷ Though many of them lack inscription, votives that represented both male and female anatomy have been found at her places of worship. Though it is unknown if these items were dedicated during festivals or individually by Hathor’s supplicants, they surely were linked in some way to fertility. Unfortunately, these items are rarely inscribed. The votive phallus dedicated by

⁴⁵ Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin, catalogue no. 783.

⁴⁶ For more on the female figurines and their possible use in fertility rituals and prayers see E. Teeter, *Baked Clay Figurines and Votive Beds from Medinet Habu*; A. Stevens, *Private Religion at Amarna: The Material Evidence* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2006); S. Quirke, “Figures of Clay: Toys or Ritual Objects?” in *Lahun Studies*, ed. S. Quirke (New Malden: Sia, 1998): 141-51; and G. Pinch, “Childbirth and Female Figurines,” 405 – 414 and *Votive Offerings to Hathor*, 198-234.

⁴⁷ G. Pinch, *Votive Offerings to Hathor*, 242-243.

the Deir el Medina scribe Ramose is an exception, and as we have seen, it requests that a favor of fertility be bestowed upon him by the goddess.⁴⁸

In a Ptolemaic stela of the Lady Taimhotep, who was wife of a priest of Ptah, Taimhotep notes that both she and her husband appealed to a god for assistance with the conception of a male child. Taimhotep states that after “My father gave me as a wife to the Prophet of Ptah,” she bore three female children. However, even though “The heart of the high priest rejoiced over it,” they still desired a male child. Taimhotep records that she “prayed together with the high priest to the majesty of the god great in wonders, effective in deeds, who gives a son to him who has none: Imhotep Son of Ptah.” The couple was lucky that the god heard their prayers. He came to the priest in a dream, stating: “Let a great work be done in the holy of holies of Ankhtawi, the place where my body is hidden. As reward for it I shall give you a male child.” The priest does as he is told and Taimhotep states: “In return he (the god) made me conceive a male child.”⁴⁹

Other types of requests for children, both in votive and letter form, were made to the dead. One recovered votive offerings depicts a woman holding a child on her hip. In the text, a birth for the woman pictured is requested from the her deceased father: “May a birth be given to your daughter Seh.”⁵⁰ A similar

⁴⁸ Ibid., 241-243. Also see Chapter 2, page 26.

⁴⁹ Translation of the Stela of Taimhotep from M. Lichtheim, *The Late Period*, 61-62.

⁵⁰ Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin, catalogue no. 14517.

figure in Paris⁵¹ states that it is “An offering which the king gives for the *ka* of Khonsu: a birth for Tita.”⁵² Additionally, in a First Intermediate Period letter to a deceased relative, we see that a son requests of his father, among other things, a healthy male child.⁵³ In all of these cases the dead were believed to be able to assist with conception. Though we find no specific evidence in the archaeological record, we can assume due to their power to affect other parts of the human body that the dead could also have been believed to have the power to prevent conception.

Though not as exceptionally as Osiris conveyed Horus to Isis, an Egyptian man and woman would have engaged in sexual activity, namely coitus, to conceive a child. When that conception occurred, they would have believed that the man’s sperm carried the future child’s spirit. The child’s mother would have contributed the child’s heart, and she would also have, like Isis, been in charge of nurturing the child in her womb. However, the mother and father were not the only ones who were intimately involved in the creation of the child. The gods and even the dead could play a role in giving fertility to the couple. And, once a woman believed she had conceived a child, a whole new phase of life began for both the expectant mother and her family.

⁵¹ Musée du Louvre, Paris, catalogue no. 8000.

⁵² For a detailed discussion of these two and other fertility figures see G. Pinch, *Votive Offerings to Hathor*, 211-225.

⁵³ Text on Chicago Jar Stand, published in E. Wente, *Letters from Ancient Egypt* (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1990), 213.

CHAPTER 4

“This Falcon in My Womb:” Diagnosing and Managing Pregnancy

Lightning strikes; the gods are afraid. Isis wakes pregnant with the seed of her brother Osiris. The woman raises herself quickly; her heart is joyful over the seed of her brother Osiris.

She says: ‘Come gods, you will make his protection within my womb – know in your hearts that he is your lord.’¹

Waking with the knowledge of her pregnancy, Isis was elated. She rose quickly and announced the conception of her child to her divine family. She spared no time demanding the necessary protections and taking action to guard her unborn child. Though threatened by chaotic forces in the form of the god Seth, Isis was able to successfully manage her pregnancy through the magic and protection of the gods.

The knowledge of a new pregnancy for an Egyptian woman, as for the goddess Isis, could be both exciting and frightening. Before the pregnancy was announced, the woman would have had a variety of ways that she could attempt to diagnose her condition, and at least one way to try to determine the sex of her child. While a pregnancy could bring joy to a family, the liminal status of the woman and the growing child during the term of pregnancy could also cause fear and anxiety for the woman and her family members. Because a pregnancy presented potential threats to both mother and child, it is not surprising that the woman and her family would have appealed to the gods for protection and also engaged in myth-mirroring rituals that likened the women to Isis and other mother goddesses in hopes of preventing miscarriage and pre-term labor. Mortal women

¹ Author’s translation of Coffin Text 148, a spell for taking shape as a falcon.

put their faith in the favor and power of the gods, hoping that they, like Isis, could carry their children to term.

“Isis Wakes Pregnant”

When Isis “wakes pregnant with the seed of her brother Osiris,”² her knowledge of her pregnancy seems to come about quickly after the event of conception. Even the god Atum is skeptical of her pregnancy and the paternity of the child when he asks: “How do you know?” Isis confidently replies: “I am Isis, more pure and well esteemed than the gods – The god within this belly of mine; he is the seed of Osiris.”³ However, a mortal Egyptian woman would not likely have been able to truly confirm a pregnancy until she could feel the movements of her child – anywhere from four to five months into the pregnancy.⁴ But, before that, there were a variety of signs of pregnancy she may have noticed and even a test she could have carried out to attempt to confirm the pregnancy.

One of the most notable symptoms of pregnancy is amenorrhea – the cessation of menstruation.⁵ Ancient Egyptian women, depending on age,⁶

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The quickening is the first perception of fetal movement and it generally occurs between 18-20 weeks of gestation. It is also of note that women do not always identify this sensation with fetal movements and/or as indicative of pregnancy. Early fetal movement can be interpreted as gas or other digestive pain. Personal communication with Dr. Lewis Wall.

⁵ For women with regular menstrual cycles, amenorrhea is a fairly reliable indicator of pregnancy.

⁶ Using cross-cultural evidence from Beverly Strassmann’s study on the millet farming Dogon of Mali, a pre-industrialized natural-fertility population, we can assume that menarche likely occurred for Egyptian women between the ages of 14 and 18, with the median age for menstruation as 16 years of age. For more see B. Strassmann, “The

socioeconomic status,⁷ and mental and/or physical health⁸ may have not had completely predictable menstrual cycles.⁹ However, in the most general sense, the Egyptians seemed to understand that a pregnancy could cause menstruation to cease.¹⁰ In fact, in literature the cessation of menstruation is used as a euphemism to designate a state of pregnancy. In Setne I, Ahwere designates

Biology of Menstruation in Homo Sapiens: Total Lifetime Menses, Fecundity, and Nonsynchrony in a Natural-Fertility Population,” *Current Anthropology* 38.1 (1997): 123-129. During the first few years after menarche many women’s periods do not fall into a predictable pattern, see D. Asso in *The Real Menstrual Cycle* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1983), 15, quoting H. Katchadourian, *The Biology of Adolescence* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1977) and R. Swerdloff, R. S. and T. Rubin, “Psychological and Endocrinological Changes in Puberty,” in *Perspectives in Endocrine Psychobiology*, ed. F. Brambilla, P. Bridges, E. Endroczi, and G. Heuser (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1978).

⁷ Low calorie intake and/or physical stress can cause amenorrhea in women. D. Asso, *The Real Menstrual Cycle*, 148. It is likely that poor Egyptian women who did not consume the necessary calories, and/or were physically overexerted, may not have all had monthly menstrual periods.

⁸ Emotional stress, as well as certain health conditions, like anemia, can also causes amenorrhea. D. Asso, *The Real Menstrual Cycle*, 146-148.

⁹ Strassmann’s research shows that in Dogon society, women cycle roughly 128 times per reproductive lifetime. This number is low as it accounts for the cessation of menstruation during periods of pregnancy, lactational amenorrhea, and other disorders of the female reproductive cycle that cause menstruation to cease. However, compared to the estimated 400 cycles per reproductive lifecycle for women in modern industrialized societies with access to birth control, it gives an idea of the variability of women’s cycles in the pre-modern world. Thus, while cessation of menstruation is strong predictor of pregnancy for women with a history of predictable menstrual cycles, it may not have been the determining factor for all women who became pregnant as their cycles could have shown considerable variation.

¹⁰ Pregnancy is not the only reason for the cessation of menstruation. Lactation, various disorders of the female reproductive organs, along with calorie intake and exercise levels can influence the menstrual cycle. The Egyptians clearly understood that there were disorders of the menstrual period that were not associated with pregnancy. Papyrus Smith, for example, in verso 20, notes such a disorder stating: “When you examine a woman who suffers from her stomach, her menstruation doesn’t come, and you find something on the top part of her navel. Then you shall say about it: this is a blockage of the blood in her uterus.” English translation of Papyrus Smith 20 from the German of H. von Deines. H. Grapow, and W. Westendorf, *Grundriss IV*, 272.

that she is pregnant after sleeping with her brother Naneferkaptah “over and over again” by saying: “When my time came to make purification, I did not make purification again.”¹¹ The reference to pregnancy in Setne II is more explicit, stating that after Mehusekhe receives the “fluid of conception,” that “When her time of purification came she had] the sign of a woman who has conceived.”¹² The literature suggests that the cessation of menstruation was likely the first obvious indication of pregnancy for many Egyptian women. But, it is likely that the Egyptians also noticed other common symptoms of pregnancy. Hormonal levels and the growing fetus cause physiological changes to the mother’s body in pregnancy, and it is highly likely that the Egyptians would have amassed knowledge of these symptoms associated with the pregnant state.

A variety of physiological changes occur during the first trimester of pregnancy that produce visible changes in the body, which can include: maternal weight gain, increased blood flow and pronounced veins, enlarged and tender breasts, the darkening of the nipples and other body parts, and discoloration of the vagina and cervix.¹³ In addition to these visible body changes, nausea is also common in roughly 50% of pregnancies from weeks two to twelve of gestation. Due to increased blood flow, women are also more likely to get dizzy and

¹¹ Translation of Setne I from M. Lichtheim, *The Late Period*, 128. The term that is translated “purification” here by Lichtheim is the word *ḥsmn*, which is a euphemism for menstruation.

¹² Translation of Setne II from *ibid.*, 138.

¹³ H. Bernstein and M. Weinstein “Normal Pregnancy and Prenatal Care, in *Lange Obstetrics and Gynecology*, ed. A. Decherney (New York: McGraw Hill, 2007), 187-189.

lightheaded during pregnancy.¹⁴ It is likely that these symptoms, especially when occurring together, could have been recognized as indicative of a new pregnancy.

Though the aforementioned observable changes were not explicitly referenced as pregnancy tests, it seems quite probably that the tests used to predict fertility came from observations of the pregnant female body. The fertility tests from the papyri of Kahun, Carlsberg and Berlin suggest that pronounced veins in the breasts, changes in color to the eyes and breasts, and nausea can designate a woman who will bear children from one who will not. As we have seen in Chapter 2, it is possible that observable changes in gravid women led to these assumptions of condition in non-gravid, but fertile women.¹⁵

Interestingly, there were also urine tests that the Egyptians devised to determine if a woman was pregnant. While not as fast or as accurate as modern urine tests that measure hormone levels,¹⁶ the urine test laid out in the Berlin Medical papyrus stated that if a woman urinated on grains, she could find out not only if she was pregnant, but also the sex of her unborn child. The text states:

Another [way of] determining (*m33*) that a woman will give birth <or> that she will not give birth. Barley <and> emmer,¹⁷ the woman shall moisten

¹⁴ Ibid., 188.

¹⁵ See Chapter 2, pages 37-45.

¹⁶ Modern urine tests measure the amount of hCG (human chorionic gonadotropin) in the urine. hCG is a glycoprotein hormone produced during pregnancy that is detectable in the urine of pregnant females as early as ten days after conception. Though the Egyptians were not aware of the presence of hormones in urine, they did seem to recognize that pregnant urine was different than non-pregnant urine.

¹⁷ Emmer is a type of wheat, and thus below in the discussion it will be simplified as “wheat” as it is commonly referred to in the studies discussed. However, it will also be pointed out below that there is an issue of translation with these grain terms. If the grains

<them> with her urine every day like dates <and> like the sand, in two pouches. If they <both> grow, then she shall give birth. If the barley grows, it means a male child. If the emmer grows, it means a female child. If they don't grow, then she shall not give birth.¹⁸

Modern scholars have been curious about the validity of this test.¹⁹ The first modern test by J. Manger in the 1930s found no difference in seed growth between pregnant and non-pregnant urine. However he diluted the urine to such an extent for fear of its toxicity to the plant life that it is not surprising that his study could not detect a difference between the two urine types.²⁰ In W. Hoffman's study, just a year later, he found that non-pregnant urine inhibits growth in various types of barley and wheat, while pregnant urine (less diluted than that in Manger's study) allows for growth in all grains. Hoffman also determined that hormones tested for in modern urine tests were not those that

chosen in the modern test are incorrect, there is, obviously, a considerable difference between the ancient and modern test.

¹⁸ English translation of Berlin 199 from the German of H. von Deines, H. Grapow, and W. Westendorf, *Grundriss IV*, 275. Though very damaged, a possible parallel version of this test occurs in Papyrus Carlsberg VIII, paragraph III. Unfortunately, the texts tell us only: [...] You shall [put] barley <and> emmer into a pouch [made] from cloth [...] on it every day.[.....] dates [...] she will give birth to a son [...]...<she> will give birth (?) many ...If she doesn't [.....]. Carlsberg VIII paragraph II may have another test, but it is too damaged to be useful. English translation of Carlsberg VIII, paragraph III and II from *ibid.*, 276.

¹⁹ This test has been carried out and the findings published by J. Manger "Untersuchungen zum Problem der Geschlechtsdiagnose aus Schwangerenarn," *Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift* 59 (1933): 885-87; W. Hoffman, Versuche zur Schwangerschaftsdiagnose aus dem Harn," *Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift* 60 (1934): 882-824; E. Henriksen, "Pregnancy Tests of the Past and the Present," 567-575; and P. Ghalioungui, et al., "On Diagnosing Pregnancy," 241-246.

²⁰ J. Manger "Untersuchungen zum Problem der Geschlechtsdiagnose aus Schwangerenarn," 885-87.

caused growth in the urine-watered seeds.²¹ A few years later, though not divulging testing methods, E. Henriksen reported a 75% correct positive growth for pregnancy, and an 85% positive lack of growth for non-pregnant urine when carrying out this test in the lab.²² In the case of sex determination the study noted that results of the test “fell below the level of chance when it was applied to the prediction of sex.”²³

A more recent test by P. Ghalioungui and colleagues confirmed that non-pregnant urine will not cause growth in either barley or wheat. In their study, the urine of pregnant women caused growth in twenty-eight of the forty cases. Thus, they concluded that when either barley or wheat grows under urine, the woman is pregnant. However, if the seeds of either do not grow, it does not preclude pregnancy, as the urine of twelve pregnant women did not cause growth in either plant type. They also found that the determination of sex could not be made from this test. In the forty cases, only nineteen were correct at predicting sex. However, the study does note that since the test was carried out on filter paper in a lab, and not in a mix of sand and dates as the text designates, their test may not match the Egyptian test. They also noted that since scholars disagree on the seeds mentioned in the papyri,²⁴ if the seeds noted are not barley and wheat, their results are less relevant.

²¹ W. Hoffman, “Versuche zur Schwangerschaftsdiagnose,” 882-824.

²² E. Henriksen, “Pregnancy Tests of the Past and the Present,” 567-575.

²³ *Ibid.*, 567.

²⁴ For a discussion of the various interpretations of the types of grain in the text by various Egyptologists, see P. Ghalioungui, et al., “Diagnosing Pregnancy,” 241.

Overall, the studies do confirm that pregnant urine will cause growth in barley and wheat and non-pregnant urine will not. Thus, if a pregnant woman had knowledge of this test, she may have been able to diagnose her pregnancy. If the test correctly predicted the sex of the unborn baby, however, it was likely by chance.

“His Heart Was Happy on Account of It”

Once a woman believed that she had conceived, she may have announced the pregnancy to the father or her child, and even to other family members. A confirmed pregnancy, in most cases, would have been cause for joy, and possibly even celebration. In Setne II, we see that after Mehusekhe becomes pregnant, she informs her husband. The story tells us: “It was announced to Setne, and] his heart was very happy on account of it.”²⁵ While Setne I does not mention Ahwere announcing her pregnancy to her husband, it does note that her pregnancy was reported to Ahwere’s father. Ahwere states that when it was “reported to Pharaoh, and his heart was very happy. Pharaoh had many things taken [out of the treasury] and sent me presents of silver, gold, and royal linen, all very beautiful.”²⁶ Though Ahwere is royalty and her pregnancy was elaborately celebrated, it is possible that once a woman’s pregnancy was announced there would have been some type of festivity surrounding the announcement that included a transmission of gifts to the woman and/or her

²⁵ Translation of Setne I from M. Lichtheim, *The Late Period*, 138.

²⁶ Translation of Setne I *ibid.*, 128.

family.²⁷ Whether or not a woman identified and announced her pregnancy early on, soon enough her growing belly and the movements of the child would alerted her to her pregnancy. By this time, if they had not been told already, her family, friends, and neighbors, too, would know of the impending birth.

“Nurse in the Womb”

As with other aspects of reproductive life, the woman and her family would have likely believed that her health during pregnancy and her ability to grow and nurture the child came not just from within her, but from the gods. Divine hymns show that the gods were praised for their ability to give health to pregnant women and to nurture the life that the gods had placed in their wombs. A Middle Kingdom hymn to the Nile god Hapy tells us that Hapy provides health and happiness to pregnant women; he is praised as one who “sustains the pregnant woman’s heart.”²⁸ In The Hymn to the Aten we see that the power to create and nurture is attributed to the Aten: “Who feeds the son in the mother’s womb, Who soothes him to still his tears. Nurse in the womb, giver of breath, to nourish all that he made.”²⁹

²⁷ For more on gift giving in Egyptian society, see J. J. Janssen, “Gift Giving in Ancient Egypt as an Economic Feature,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 68 (1982): 253-258.









²⁸ Translation of The Hymn to Hapy from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 206. Lichtheim suggests that this is a Middle Kingdom composition, though the version of the text translated comes from a New Kingdom copy of the text.

²⁹ Translation of the text on the architrave of first row of columns on the right of the Hypostyle Hall at Karnak, from the reign of Ramesses II from J. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt, Vol. 3, The Nineteenth Dynasty* (1906; repr., Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 2001), 218.

With a belief that the gods nurtured life in the womb, giving the fetus comfort, breath, and sustenance, it is not surprising that this idea is reflected in royal inscriptions, too. In one of the many inscriptions of Ramesses II at Karnak, Amun is recorded as saying that he has “brought up” Ramesses “from the womb.” This statement stresses not only Amun’s parentage, but also his divine role in nurturing the child before his birth. Thus, it seems that the gods could help sustain the mother during her pregnancy. Additionally, they not only imbued her with the power to facilitate the growth of the child and its formation into a person, but they also were the ones who provided nourishment and comfort to the child in the womb.

“Pressure is in Your Womb”

The growing belly of a pregnant woman was clearly understood as occurring from the transition of the “seed” of a man into a growing baby during the gestational period, and in daily life, women, obviously, would have been seen in a state of pregnancy. However, because both mother and child were vulnerable to malevolent deities, spirits, and people during this period, pregnant women and their children were rarely written about or rendered. With only a few visual references to pregnancy from the physical world, we must again turn to the funerary realm to shed light on the Egyptian understanding of the growth of the mother’s belly and the disposition of the fetus during gestation.

In written language, the sign B2  shows a pregnant woman, and this sign is used to determine the words *jwr*     and *bk3*    “to become/be pregnant.” The woman in B2 is shown only slightly pregnant, with a

small bump protruding from her dress and possibly a ritual knot or tie in her hair. Interestingly, the other extant images of pregnant women in the physical world are similar. From the temple context, there are only a few cases of women being shown in a state of pregnancy. One early example of a pregnant woman is in the Old Kingdom tomb of Ankhmahor at Saqqara. In a funeral scene, a pregnant woman is shown fainting in a line of female mourners. The woman is shown only slightly pregnant, but her pronounced belly suggests that she is with child.³⁰

In the New Kingdom divine birth cycles of both Hatshepsut at Deir el Bahri and Amenhotep III at Luxor, we see the queen mothers depicted in a state of pregnancy. In two similar scenes, after conceiving their divine children, Ahmose and Mutemwia are led by the gods Heket and Khnum, and Hathor and Khnum, respectively, towards their birth rooms.³¹ In both cases the queens are portrayed as only slightly pregnant with tiny protruding bellies.³² This is quite interesting as they are on their way to deliver their divine children, and in reality, would have been heavily pregnant at this time. These few surviving examples of pregnant

³⁰ Funerary scene in the Old Kingdom tomb of Ankhmahor published in A. Badawy, *The Tomb of Nyhetep-Ptah at Giza and the Tomb of Ankh-mahor at Saqqarah* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1978), figure 56.

³¹ For the divine birth cycle at Deir el Bahri see E. Naville, *The Temple of Deir el Bahari, Part II* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1896), pls. XLVI-LV. For those of Amenhotep III see C. Campbell, *The Miraculous Birth of King Amon-Hotep III, and Other Egyptian Studies* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1912). For detailed analysis and a combination of the myths and scenes, including line drawings, see H. Brunner, *Die Geburt des Gottkönigs: Studien zur Überlieferung eines altägyptischen Mythos* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1964).

³² It is also of note that in these scenes, the queens and the goddesses Heket and Hathor are depicted with wider stances than is common for standard depictions of Egyptian women. Whether this denoted the wider stance and waddle of pregnant women (similar to the way Taweret was depicted to stand in sculpture), or suggests a quicker walk to the birth room is unknown.

women suggest both that it was not common to depict pregnant women, and that when they were depicted, they were not shown heavily pregnant. Because the dangers³³ to mother and child grew as the child grew and the pregnancy progressed, it could be that the Egyptians were more comfortable depicting women, no matter their phase of pregnancy, in the early stages of a pregnancy when less harm was likely to come to the mother and child.

Though women were not generally depicted in the late stages of pregnancy, there may be one exception from the realm of material culture. There is one type of female vessel that may bear the form of a heavily pregnant woman.³⁴ These vessels, which may have been crafted to hold oils and ointments of pregnancy,³⁵ are in the form of a woman with a large belly protruding from her front, with disproportionately thick arms and legs. Emma Brunner-Traut, who studied these and other types of female vessels, suggests the women shown in these vessels are not exactly “human,” but more closely resemble the pregnant hippopotamus goddess, Taweret,³⁶ who was known to be

³³ A spontaneous abortion, one that occurs before 20 weeks of gestation, or a premature labor and delivery, which occurs after 20 weeks but before 37 weeks of gestation, becomes more dangerous as the size of the pregnancy increases. Personal communication with Dr. Lewis Wall.

³⁴ For a representative vessel of this type, see the alabaster jar of a woman from The Oriental Museum at the University of Chicago, catalogue no. 11313. Published in *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven, Women in Ancient Egypt*, ed. A. Capel and G. Markoe (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1996), 63. For an overview of these vessels, see E. Brunner-Traut, “Gravidenflasche: Das Salben des Mutterleibes,” in *Archäologie und altes Testament: Festschrift für Kurt Galling*, ed. A. Kuschke and E. Kutsch (Tübingen, 1970), 35-48.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 40-41. For a vessel with lion paws, see an example in Carlsberg at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, AEIN 1646. Published in M. Mørgensen, *La collection*

a protector of pregnant women by the New Kingdom, and possibly earlier in her Middle Kingdom form as Ipet.³⁷ If this is the case, it is possible that by merging the human female form with that of a goddess who protected pregnant woman may have been a way to safely show a heavily pregnant woman.

In the funerary realm, textual and visual references to pregnancy, while not common, do present a bit more detail on pregnancy than those originating from the physical realm. First, in the Pyramid Texts we find explicit references to the growing belly of the sky goddess Nut due to her pregnancy. In Pyramid Text 325, the deceased king Teti is in the belly of the sky waiting his rebirth and it is noted that: “[Hepati], the sky’s belly has swollen with the force of the [god’s] seed that is in it. Behold Teti: Teti is the god’s seed that is in it.”³⁸ In a variation of this spell, Pyramid Text 563 from the pyramid of Pepi, the swelling of the belly of the pregnant sky goddess Nut is also mentioned in the statement: “Your belly, Nut, will swell with the god’s seed that is in you; in fact, Pepi is the god’s seed that is in you, Nut.”³⁹ Here we see reference to the goddesses growing belly, which is described as “swelling” directly from the transition from seed to child.

In Coffin Text 716 we find an unusual reference to the deceased as a fetus. The text reads: “I am the child who slept and was helpless in his mother’s

égyptienne; la Glyptothèque Ny Carlsberg (Copenhagen: Levin and Munksgaard, 1930), 223, plate 68.

³⁷ For a short overview of the evolution of Ipet and Taweret, see J. Weingarten, *The Transformation of Egyptian Taweret into the Minoan Genius: A Study in Cultural Transmission in the Middle Bronze Age* (Partille: Paul Åströms Förlag, 1991), 3-6.

³⁸ Translation of Pyramid Text 325, a lustration text, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 68.

³⁹ Translation of Pyramid Text 563, a lustration text, from *ibid.*, 174.

entrails; what I remember and what I forget, I will say in $\bar{O}n$.”⁴⁰ Here we see that the child in the womb could be regarded as both “sleeping” and “helpless” in the belly of his mother. In depictions, too, the fetus was rendered as a small helpless child encircled in the belly of its mother. Images of the sun god in the belly of the sky from the astronomical texts in the tomb of Ramesses VI show the fetal sun god encircled in the womb in the belly of Nut.⁴¹ And, in one ostracon from Deir el Medina, we find a similar sketch, which most likely also represents the goddess, not a mortal woman.⁴²

“Breaking the Egg”

It is not surprising that the Egyptians were fearful of pregnancy and childbirth. Even before the expected onset of labor, the high rates of miscarriage, preterm labor, and stillbirths would have caused anxiety about the period of pregnancy and the malevolent forces that threatened women and children. Though the Egyptians would not have detected as many miscarriages as we do today, they would have been intimately familiar with the threat that miscarriage and premature birth⁴³ posed to women and their children during pregnancy and

⁴⁰ Translation of Coffin Text 716, a spell of speech in Heliopolis, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts II*, 271.

⁴¹ For the publication of this scene, see A. Piankoff, *The Tomb of Ramesses VI*, 149. For the Nut ceiling in the tomb, as well as line drawings, see *ibid.* 149-159.

⁴² See L. Meskell, “Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt,” 70 for a rendering of the ostracon, which was originally published by A. Piankoff in his article “La vierge ‘znamenie’ et la déesse Nout,” in the *Bulletin de la Societe d’Archeologie Copte* 16 (1962): 261-269, figure 1.

⁴³ “Neonatal deaths are more common with premature birth and the rate of death increases directly with the degree of prematurity.” Dr. Lewis Wall, personal communication.

they would have done their best to prevent these early fetal terminations and births.

Today it is assumed that in healthy women, 15-20% of recognized pregnancies result in miscarriage.⁴⁴ It is reasonable to assume that this number could have been higher in the ancient world, where malnutrition, overexertion, parasitic infections,⁴⁵ and diseases could have caused reproductive problems, including miscarriage, preterm labor, and stillbirth. While it is true that an early miscarriage⁴⁶ may have gone unnoticed, if a woman experienced a period of amenorrhea followed by heavy bleeding, she may have assumed a failed pregnancy even a few weeks after conception. A later first trimester miscarriage would have been easier to detect, especially if visible fetal material was passed.

⁴⁴ American Pregnancy Association, "Miscarriage," <http://www.americanpregnancy.org/pregnancycomplications/miscarriage.html> (accessed March 15, 2012).

⁴⁵ Based on ancient mummies and modern science, we can assume that parasitic infections, specifically, could have been a cause of miscarriage and preterm labor. Egyptian mummies have shown evidence of parasitic infections and these types of infections can cause reproductive issues for women. Schistosomiasis, specifically, has been found in both in mummies and modern Egyptians at a high rate. This particular parasite, which is contracted from wading in the Nile, can invade the uterus, ovaries, cervix and fallopian tubes of women and is known to cause ectopic pregnancies, miscarriage, preterm labor, intrauterine growth restriction and sterility. For infections in mummies see: G. Contis and A. R. David "The Epidemiology of Bilharzia in Ancient Egypt: 5000 Years of Schistosomiasis," *Parasitology Today* 12. 7 (1996): 253-255 and P. Lambert-Zazulak, "The International Ancient Egyptian Mummy Tissue Bank at the Manchester Museum as a Resource for the Palaeoepidemiological Study of Schistosomiasis," *World Archaeology* 35.2 (2003): 223-240. For evidence of reproductive issues due to infection see: G. Helling-Giese, E. F. Kjetland, S. G. Gundersen, G. Poggensee, I. Kratz, and H. Feldmeier, "Schistosomiasis In Women: Manifestations In the Upper Reproductive Tract," *Acta Tropica* 62.4 (1996): 225-238 and B. Swai, G. Poggensee, S. Mtweve, and I. Kratz, "Female Genital Schistosomiasis as an Evidence of a Neglected Cause for Reproductive Ill-health: A Retrospective Histopathological Study from Tanzania," *BMC Infectious Diseases* 6 (2006): 134.

⁴⁶ An early miscarriage is a miscarriage that occurs up to six weeks of gestation.

A second trimester miscarriage, or a stillbirth, which today occurs in one in every 160 pregnancies,⁴⁷ would most certainly have been noticed due to the size of the fetus at expulsion. Not only would a miscarriage or the birth of a preterm and/or stillborn infant be emotionally traumatic, serious complications could occur for the mother when passing the fetus.

A wide variety of infant remains have been recovered and recorded from ancient Egypt. However, it is impossible to determine stillbirth in fetal remains, and it can be difficult, unless the remains are notably smaller than a term baby, to determine the difference between a preterm fetus and term baby that died at, or just after, birth.⁴⁸ Once clear example of premature birth comes from two fetuses that were buried in the tomb of Tutankhamun.⁴⁹ These fetuses, one likely around seven months gestational age, and one at five months, clearly were born early and were not able to survive outside the womb due to their young age.⁵⁰ The

⁴⁷ Stillbirth refers to an instance when a fetus has died in the uterus after 20 weeks gestation, or if the baby weighs more than 400 grams. Stillbirth rates from American Pregnancy Association, "Stillbirth," <http://www.americanpregnancy.org/pregnancyloss/sbtryingtounderstand.html> (accessed March 15, 2012).

⁴⁸ Though modern excavators have precise methods for estimating age based on bone measurements, dividing fetuses into trimesters of three month intervals, and young infants into 3 month age groups, when a fetus is near or at term, they are referred to as "perinatal" as it is difficult to tell the difference between a late preterm fetus and a newborn. For more on the dating of fetal and infant remains, see B. Baker, T. Dupras, and M. Tocheri in *The Osteology of Infants and Children* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2010), 10. Though it is outside the scope of this study, an investigation into preterm birth which focused on collecting the measurements of fetal and perinatal remains could reveal more concrete evidence of both preterm birth and fetal death in ancient Egypt.

⁴⁹ F. F. Leek, *Tut'ankhamūn's Tomb Series V, The Human Remains from the Tomb of Tut'ankhamūn* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1972), 21-23, plates XXIII and XXIV.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

most telling data on premature birth and fetal loss comes from Joyce Filer's study on mother and infant burials from Nubia.⁵¹ Though from a later period and a bit further south,⁵² Filer's study presents the remains of four women who were buried with fetuses ranging in gestational age from four to eight months. Three of the fetuses are under six months gestational age, and at this young age, would not have been able to survive outside the womb. The fourth, at eight months, would have had survival potential, but it appears, like the others, that it met an early passing along with its mother. How or why these fetuses were delivered early is unknown, however, since they are buried at the feet, by the abdomen, or between the legs of these women, we know they, like their mothers, did not live long after delivery.

"Guard this Falcon in My Womb"

It is telling that once Isis, the quintessential mother, learns of her pregnancy she goes directly to the gods for protection. She calls out to the gods and demands protection of her unborn son: "Come gods, you will make his protection within my womb." Atum grants Isis's request for protection, guaranteeing the birth of her child, saying: "Oh, mistress, you are pregnant and you are hidden. You will give birth, being pregnant for the gods as he is the seed of Osiris."⁵³ Like Isis, mortal women, too, likely would have quickly prayed to the

⁵¹ J. Filer, "Mother and Baby Burials," in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Egyptologists, Cambridge 3-9 September 1995* (Leuven: Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 1998), 391-400.

⁵² Filer's study focuses on data from the Meroitic, post-Meroitic, and Christian period from a cemetery in Gabati, Nubia.

⁵³ Author's translation of Coffin Text 148, a spell for taking shape as a falcon.

gods for protection upon learning of their pregnancies, and they would have attempted to associate themselves with Isis and other mother goddesses to ensure that they, too, had a healthy and protected period of pregnancy.

In literature, we see direct evidence of the immediate protection of pregnant women. In Setne II, as soon as Mehusekhe conceives and it is announced to Setne, the story tells us that “his heart was very happy on account of it. He [hung] an amulet [on her] and recited a spell to her.”⁵⁴ In this instance, no time is wasted in protecting Setne's wife and their unborn child. Not surprisingly, many amulets for the protection of women have been recovered from ancient Egypt. Most commonly these amulets take the form of the goddess Taweret and the dwarf god Bes. Other gods such as Horus, Hathor, Heket, Bastet, and Isis, as well as symbols of protection like the udjat eye, may have also been employed for the protection of the mother and unborn child. Additionally, these amulets also appear in tombs to assist the tomb owner during “gestation” and rebirth.⁵⁵

Unfortunately, there are a wide variety of issues that can affect a pregnant woman and her unborn child and cause miscarriage, preterm labor, or stillbirth. Most miscarriages, particularly those in early pregnancy, are due to lethal genetic disorders in the fetus or from a variety of maternal health conditions.⁵⁶ However,

⁵⁴ Translation of Setne II from M. Lichtheim, *The Late Period*, 138.

⁵⁵ For description and overview of these amulets and their use in life and death, see C. Andrews, “Amulets of Protection and Aversion” in *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 36-49.

⁵⁶ Dr. Lewis Wall, personal communication.

without knowledge of these issues, the Egyptians would have, in most cases, ascribed miscarriage or pregnancy loss to malicious supernatural forces. It is clear that they believed that gods, spirits, demons, fellow Egyptians, and even foreigners could negatively affect people's health. Thus, it is likely that this type of negative intervention was also capable in bringing about the death of a child in the womb.⁵⁷

Miscarriage could be identified as the action of or likened to the god Seth.⁵⁸ Seth himself seems to have been born preterm and violently and thus was identified with early and exceptional birth. Wolfgang Helck has suggested that the Pyramid Text deliberately avoid the use of the term *msj* "to be born" in reference to Seth because he was not born at the right time or in the right way.⁵⁹ Specifically in Pyramid Text 222 when the king is referred to as the one who "the pregnant one ejected" and has "terminated the night" (been born), he is said to

⁵⁷ There are many conditions in the medico-magical texts that could result from the actions of malevolent beings, whether god, spirit, demon, or human. For just a few representative examples of the conditions created by these beings see J. F. Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), spells 2-5, 9-12, 22-27.

⁵⁸ W. Helck, *Seth, God of Confusion: A Study of His Role in Egyptian Mythology and Religion* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 28 and W. Westendorf, "Beiträge aus und zu den medizinischen Texten," *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 92 (1966): 128-154.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 27. In addition to the example in utterance 222 above, Helck uses the examples of Pyramid Text section 144 of utterance 215 and section 211 of utterance 222 as support for this claim. In both instances here, we see that Seth is described as "conceived" not "born" like Horus. Utterance 215 reads: "You are born, O Horus...you are conceived O Seth..." Utterance 222 reads: "you are born for Horus, you are conceived for Seth." Translation of Pyramid Text 215, a spell for the king's ascension as a star, and 222, a spell for joining the sun god, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 42 and 50. Without further examples and their analysis, it is difficult to discern if this word choice is stylistic or conceptual and if there was some restriction or avoidance of speaking of Seth's birth.

have done so “being equipped as Seth who broke forth violently.”⁶⁰ Additional details suggesting Seth’s birth was a violent one come from Plutarch, who noted that when Seth was born it was “not at the right time or place, but bursting through with a blow, he leapt from his mother’s side.”⁶¹

Seth was not only born violently himself, but was also a threat to Isis after the conception of Horus. Though we do not know how Seth would have induced miscarriage, it seems that Isis and gods believed that Seth had the power to prevent the birth of Osiris’s heir. In Coffin Text 148, the ability for Seth to induce miscarriage is noted when Atum says: “May the opponent who slew his father not come and break the egg that is within.”⁶² It is unknown if Seth would have attacked Isis physically or if he would have used magic that would cause Isis to abort the child. Whatever Seth’s method of attack, to keep safe, Isis not only went into hiding in Chemmis, but also received magical protection from Atum. Isis states that Atum:

‘...commanded protection for me and my son who is within my belly. He has knit together an entourage around him within this womb of mine since he knew that he was the heir of Osiris. Protection has been given by Atum- Re, Lord of the Gods, to this falcon that is in my belly.’⁶³

It is possible that the protection that was knit around Isis’s womb was magical protection of the gods, but literally may have been, or at least was interpreted as,

⁶⁰ Translation of Pyramid Text 222, a spell for joining the sun god, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 50.

⁶¹ Translation of Plutarch from J. G. Griffiths, *Plutarch’s De Iside et Osiride*, 137.

⁶² Author’s translation of Coffin Text 148, a spell for taking shape as a falcon.

⁶³ Ibid.

a physical knot that protected Isis's womb. First in the Coffin Texts, the deceased is said to protect Isis from Seth "the storm" and miscarriage the "water-flood" as "the one who knotted the rope and bound his chapel."⁶⁴ Later, in the Book of the Dead, the deceased again could be identified with this type of knot and binding, as he was said to protect the birth of the sun: "I am the knot of the god within the tamarisk; If I am hale, then Re will be hale today."⁶⁵ In the physical world, these knots, which are discussed below, were likely made of linen and imbued with magical protection, were inserted into the vagina to prevent miscarriage. Protected like Isis with Atum's magic, common women were protected from Seth and other threats of miscarriage.

Because the Egyptians understood that a miscarriage began with blood flow, the spells that were said over the knots focused on preventing the flow of blood in a pregnant woman. The Nile flood served as a metaphor for chaotic blood flow that could come with miscarriage.⁶⁶ In the first spell, the woman is protected from miscarriage by reciting this spell over a knot that is placed in her vagina:

⁶⁴ Translation of Coffin Text 1099, a spell for becoming Re, from L. Lesko, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of Two Ways*, 102-108.

⁶⁵ Translation of Chapter 42, a spell for preventing the slaughter which is carried out in Heracleopolis, from the Book of the Dead from R. O. Faulkner et al., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 105.

⁶⁶ During the inundation season the Nile flood was unpredictable and could produce havoc. Additionally, when the waters began they could run red due to the stirred up dirt, and as thus, they could have been identified with hemorrhage and disorderly blood flow from the body in medical and magical texts. For the Nile as metaphor for hemorrhage see endnote no. 84 in J. F. Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts*, 103.

The Inundation has approached (*yh*) to set foot on (? *tbi*) the land of Tait – throw out what is in you! Words to be said after you have tied two knots in a strip (*ʿz.t*) of the border of the *i33.t* fabric, (put) at the opening of the inside of her vagina, to ward off what acts against it.⁶⁷

In this instance, the woman’s uterus is protected by a woven knot of fabric associated with the goddess of weaving, Tait. The knot and power of the goddess creates a dam that the flood of blood cannot pass, thereby protecting the fetus from abortion. A similar spell states that Anubis comes to protect the woman:

Another one, for warding off a hemorrhage. Anubis has come forth to keep the Inundation from treading on what is pure – the land of Tait. Beware what is in [it]. This spell to be said over threads of the border of a *i33.t* fabric with a knot made in it. To be applied to the inside of her vagina.⁶⁸

“Her Months Have Been Completed According to the Number in Pregnancy”

Like Isis’s months gestating Horus that were completed “according to the (set) number in pregnancy, if a woman was lucky, nine full months would pass before her child was born.”⁶⁹ Though in most descriptions of pregnancy the Egyptians were vague about the duration of pregnancy, it seems possible that they had a relatively accurate estimation for the time a child should gestate in the womb.

Some literary descriptions of time of gestation indicate only that pregnancy was long. In *The Tale of the Two Brothers*, for example, the story states that after Bata impregnates the wife of the pharaoh it was “many days after this, she gave

⁶⁷ Translation of the London Medical Papyrus from *ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Translation of the Papyrus Leiden I 348, spell 34 from J. F. Borghouts, *The Magical Texts of Papyrus Leiden I 348* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), 30-31.

birth to a son.”⁷⁰ With a little more detail the tales of The Doomed Prince and Setne II show that when a woman “had completed her months,”⁷¹ “made her months,”⁷² or bore at “the right time,”⁷³ it meant that she had completed the full term of pregnancy. Though these texts give no additional details, we can assume that these euphemisms imply a full nine months of pregnancy. And, similarly, a child who was born full-term could be noted as one born “after your months.”⁷⁴

The understanding that pregnancy was a full nine months may be confirmed by the fact that a sherd from a late period marriage contract notes that one marriage had a trial of 275 days before it was official.⁷⁵ It is likely not coincidental that 275 days is just over nine full months. Here we can safely assume that this time period was in place so the new wife could prove that she was not pregnant at the time of the union. The understanding that pregnancy was roughly nine full months may also be confirmed by a sarcophagus in Berlin that states “Your mother carried you until the first day of the 10th month.”⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Translation of The Tale of the Two Brothers from M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 210.

⁷¹ Translation of The Doomed Prince from M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 200.

⁷² Translation of Setne II from M. Lichtheim, *The Late Period*, 139.

⁷³ Translation of Setne II from *ibid.*, 151.

⁷⁴ Translation of The Instruction of Any from M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 141.

⁷⁵ Demotic ostrakon from the Strasbourg Museum, catalog no. 1845.

⁷⁶ Sarcophagus from the Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin, sarcophagus no. 17.043.

Just as Isis obtains protection from Atum to carry Horus through his period of gestation, a mortal woman and her family would pray and take magical precautions to ensure that she, like Isis, would obtain the appropriate protection to keep her child safe from the threat of malevolent entities. Hopefully, those protections would allow her child to grow to term and reach “the right time of bearing.” But before that happened, a great deal of preparation would have occurred to guarantee the woman and her child a ritually safe and protected birth space.

Chapter 5 “Within the God’s Tamarisk Clump:” The Space of Birth

My mother bore me [...] within the god’s tamarisk [-clump (?)] which enfolds Thoth.¹

Thanks to the protection of the gods, Isis successfully and safely completed her months of pregnancy. Sanctioned by Atum and protected by Thoth, birth space was created for Isis in the security of the marsh of Chemmis. With the help of her divine birth attendants, Isis was able to begin her labor in secret safety.

Egyptian women understood Isis’s fears and her need for protected birth space all too well. Faced with the fear of painful contractions, protracted labor, and stillbirths, Egyptian women and their families likely took care to recreate myth-mirroring birthing space that would help ensure successful labor and bearing.² References to birth space in texts and depictions, not surprisingly, suggest that this space should be safe, hidden, and protected. The birthing area was likely prepared through ritual actions and with decorative symbols that invoked divine birth space and the gods and goddesses that protected women and children during labor and birth. Those who were called to assist the mother may have even taken on the guise of divine birth attendants and benevolent childbirth deities. If a woman was fortunate, by the time her labor began to advance, she, like Isis, would be in a ritually protected space that would help facilitate a safe and easy birth.

¹ Translation of Coffin Text 989, a spell for becoming a falcon, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts III*, 97-98.

² It is of note that type of preparation likely varied based on a woman’s socioeconomic status, location, and personal preferences.

“My Fine Pavilion”

The process of childbirth was both physically and spiritually dangerous. During this liminal time, the mother and child were at their most vulnerable – straddling a threshold between life and death. Unfortunately, at that threshold there may have been malignant entities that were attracted to, or more easily able to affect, the parturient woman and her child. Because of the dangers and intimate nature of childbirth, we can assume that utmost care was necessary to select and protect birth space.

From the funerary texts and other spells, we find that in the divine realm, goddesses gave birth in sheltered, secret space. Isis gave birth to Horus “in the nest”³ “within the Thoth’s tamarisk-clump”⁴ in Chemmis.⁵ And, Coffin Text 989 describes the secluded space where sky goddess Nut gave birth to her five divine children as the “inner apartment”⁶ of Her who bore the gods on the five epagomenal days.”⁷ Expanded upon in Coffin Text 820, the spell states that the birth of Nut’s children happened not just in the “inner apartment” but also

³ For references to the nest of Horus’s birth see Pyramid Text 669 and Coffin Text 938.

⁴ For references to Thoth’s tamarisk-clump see Pyramid Text 669, Coffin Text 286 and 989.

⁵ Translation of Coffin Text 989, a spell for becoming a falcon, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts III*, 97-98.

⁶ The word that is translated by Faulkner as the “inner apartment” is *hnwtt*, which likely designates the interior or an inner space inside of the house. Additionally, with the “*t*” twice we see that the word is the feminine of the masculine nisbe adjective “*hnw.tj*” used to denote interior space, For *hnw.tj* see *Wb* 3, 373.20; for a similar example of *hnwtt* see Pyramid Text 669 of Pepi II.

⁷ Coffin Text 989, a spell for becoming a falcon, translation from *ibid.*

specifically, in the sacred seclusion of the “secret places” of the house of her partner, Geb.⁸ Nut, like Isis who gives birth in the marsh, is provided with secret space to safely bear her children.

In literature, too, birth space is sanctioned and separated from the rest of the house. In Papyrus Westcar, the god Re impregnates Rudjedet,⁹ the wife of his priest, Rawoser. Rudjedet is set to bear triplets each of which will become a future king of Egypt, but she is not left to give birth without a little divine assistance. When her time of labor comes, Re sends Isis, Nephthys, Meskhenet, Heket, and Khnum to deliver the children. When the gods reach the house, disguised as dancing girls and a porter, Rawoser invites them into the house. The text tells states that “They went in to Rudjedet. They locked¹⁰ the room behind themselves and her.”¹¹ When the birth was complete the gods left the area and announced the children to Rawoser. The text specifies: “These gods came out, having delivered Rudjedet of the three children.”¹² Rudjedet was clearly in a specific place to give birth within her house, as the gods came “in” to

⁸ Translation of Coffin Text 820, a spell to be favored by the gods in Heliopolis. from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts III*, 10-11.

⁹ It is of note that Goedicke argues that the triplets were not literally the children of Re, but were the children of the priest of Re, Rawoser. H. Goedicke, “Anthropological Problems – Gynecological Questions,” in *Mélanges Offerts à Edith Varga: Le Lotus qui Sort de Terre*, ed. H. Györy (Budapest: Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts, 2001), 116.

¹⁰ The Egyptian term used here in the text is *htm*, “to lock” or “seal.” For more on this term see *Wb* 3, 350-352.3.

¹¹ Translation of Papyrus Westcar from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 220-221.

¹² *Ibid.*

it to see her, and “out” when the children were born. The space was also sanctioned as the gods “locked” themselves in with the woman to deliver her children.

Like Rudjedet, Egyptian women most likely gave birth within their homes. Unlike Isis who had a special area created for the birth of her child, women would have had to select the best space available for the birth of their children. It is probable that the birth, like that of Nut’s divine children, took place in the most secluded and private area of a family’s house. Thus it is not surprising that when a parturient woman called out for Hathor in one spell, she asked her to visit her in her birth “pavilion,” which was in her house. She says:

“Come to me, Hathor, my mistress, in my fine pavilion, in this happy hour with (?) this pleasant north [wind], like when there is hit [...]....falcon, like the listening of a daughter to the voice of her mother (??), like the coming (??) of a husband to his wife! Rejoicing and jubilating of those, mysterious [of forms, splendid (??) of] clothes! You are on your way to a house wi[h....”¹³

This “pavilion” is located in the woman’s house, as the spell likely either gives Hathor directions to the house or describes the house in its last line. Though damaged, it instructs Hathor: “You are on your way to a house wi{t...”¹⁴

Additionally, the only known birth brick that has been recovered from ancient Egypt,¹⁵ which will be discussed later in detail later in this chapter, was found in

¹³ Translation of Papyrus Leiden I 348, spell 33 from J. F. Borghouts, *Papyrus Leiden I 348*, 30.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The Abydos birth brick was found in 2001 by Dr. Josef Wegner’s team in the mayoral residence of Wah-Sut. The birth brick belongs to a royal woman, Reniseneb, who likely lived in the residence during the late Middle Kingdom (13th dynasty). For more on the brick see J. Wegner “A Decorated Birth-Brick from South Abydos: New Evidence

front of a small room within the residential area of the large mayoral residence. This area, both secluded and small, was in the part of the house that was associated with women's items and suggested to be female space.¹⁶ Though the location of the find may or may not have to do with the brick's original use and context of use, it is interesting that it was found just outside the smallest and most secluded room in the center of the house, which was part of a larger area of in the larger domestic complex that was associated with the woman Reniseneb.

Though literature and myth suggest that women would have given birth in private space, likely in the back of the house, scholars have presented a few other places where women may have given birth. Excavating at Deir el Medina in the 1930s, Bernard Bruyère found raised mud brick constructions in the front room space of 28 of the 68 village houses.¹⁷ He termed these rectangular structures "lit clos" or "raised beds." The structures were roughly 5.5 feet long, just over 2.5 wide and likely had enclosing sidewalls that reached up to the ceiling. With an approximate base height of 2.5 feet and a flat space that was accessed by three to five small steps,¹⁸ the structures were notably high and small, a place large enough for a small person to sleep in (though likely not too comfortably), but too small a space in which to give birth in the traditional

on Childbirth and Birth Magic in the Middle Kingdom," in *Archaism and Innovation: Studies in the Culture of Middle Kingdom Egypt*," ed. D. Silverman, W. K. Simpson, and J. Wegner (New Haven: Yale Egyptological Seminar, 2009), 447-496.

¹⁶ Ibid., 486-491.

¹⁷ B. Bruyère, *Rapport sur les Fouilles de Deir El Médineh 1934-35* (Cairo: Fouilles de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 1939), 55-56.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Egyptian manner.¹⁹ However, it seems due to the connotation of the lit clos as a bed and the imagery that these structures were adorned with, including the protective god Bes, dancing girls, and women at their toilette, the structure has become commonly associated the event of childbirth.²⁰ Due to this a variety of scholars have argued that these structures were used as birth space.²¹

Recent work by Aikaterini Koltsida on gendered space, however, argues against birth in the front room of the workmen's houses, and especially within the lit clos structures at Deir el Medina. Koltsida has shown that the front rooms in both the Deir el Medina and Amarna workers houses were likely public, ungendered space. These spaces were sometimes constructed without roofs, and, in some instances, they show evidence of housing family livestock.²² This does not seem an ideal place to bear a child or carry out one's recovery from childbirth. More importantly, Koltsida shows that the height and size of these structures is far too small to accommodate a woman in labor and her attendants. Even if the woman was to labor without assistance in this space, the birth

¹⁹ The manner in which Egyptian women gave birth was likely squatting on birthing bricks, or a stool. They were supported by at least one, if not two to three women. It would have been impossible to give birth like this in such a small space.

²⁰ L. Meskell, *Archaeologies of Social Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 100.

²¹ For the lit clos as birth space see B. Bruyère, *Deir El Médineh*, 59; E. Brunner-Traut, "Die Wochenlaube," 23; K. Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant. The Life and Times of Ramesses II, King of Egypt* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1982), 187; G. Pinch, "Childbirth and Female Figurines at Deir el-Medina and el-' Amarna," *Orientalia* 52 (1983): 405-414; and F. Freidman, "Domestic Life and Religion," in "Pharaoh's Workers," ed. L. Lesko (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 102.

²² A. Koltsida, "Domestic Space and Gender Roles in Ancient Egyptian Village Households: A View from Amarna Workmen's Village and Deir el-Medina," *British School at Athens Studies* 15 (2007): 121-127.

attendant would not be able to access the parturient woman properly to receive the child, being 2.5 feet under her on a small step.²³

Just because women did not give birth in these structures does not mean that they did not have an important purpose within the house though their associations with women, sexuality, fertility, and childbirth. The decoration of the extant lit clos structures do imply the celebration of women's sexual and reproductive lives,²⁴ and scholars have shown that this space could have been a site not only of prayer to household gods, but also a place of ritual and celebration of sexuality and the fecundity of the household.²⁵ It would not make sense to have a structure that was used, at most, once or twice a year, in the restricted space of a workman's house. This does not mean, however, that this

²³ A. Koltsida, "Birth-bed, Sitting Place, Erotic Corner or Domestic Altar? A Study of the so-called "elevated bed" in Deir el-Medina Houses," *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 35 (2006): 165-174.

²⁴ The structures were most commonly decorated with images of the god Bes and scenes of female activity, either painted or in relief. Overall, Bes appears most frequently in the Deir el Medina houses. Bes is found dancing in both houses C V (Bruyère 1934-35, 305) and SO VI (Bruyère 1934-35, 330, figure 202), twice dancing in NE X (Bruyère 1934-35, 255, figure 131), once in NE XIII – though only his legs remain (Bruyère 1934-35, 259, figure 136), and in SE IX two masks of Bes are found in relief (Bruyère 1934-35, 276, figure 148). Another common theme in the decoration of the structures was women's activities. A woman with a Bes tattoo is depicted dancing in SE VIII (Bruyère 1934-35, 274, figure 145), and in C VII a woman is at her toilette (Bruyère 1934-35, 311). There is also a fragmentary depiction of a woman being attended by three women, although only their feet remain. This scene could be reconstructed as a woman either at her toilette or, possibly, nursing a child – for a reconstruction of the scene and parallels see E. Brunner-Traut, "Die Wochenlaube," 11-30. Other decorations include a man in a papyrus skiff in NO XII (Bruyère 1934-35, 286) and an unidentified white and gray wall painting in NE XII (Bruyère 1934-35, 257).

²⁵ F. Friedman, "Domestic Life and Religion," 110-111 and G. Robins, "Dress, Undress and the Representation of Fertility and Potency," 29.

structure was not the seat of prayers, rituals, and/or other celebrations of childbirth.

Scholars have also argued that women may have given birth in a specially constructed arbor.²⁶ Artistic representations of these arbors suggest that they may have been of a temporary nature, and were comprised of papyrus shaped column supports with light roofs layered in convolvulus. First to study the pictorial evidence from ostraca and wall scenes from the New Kingdom, Emma Brunner-Traut suggested that “wochenlaube,” or birth arbors, were constructed for women to give birth in and carry out their postpartum recovery.²⁷ Unfortunately, though possibly rendered in stone in Greco-Roman temple birth houses,²⁸ no such structure from daily life has survived in the archaeological record.

Though Brunner-Traut suggested that the structures were likely outside the home or on the roof, she did not deny that it was possible that the structures could have been in the home.²⁹ While it seems the blood of birth may have had the potential to attract malevolent deities,³⁰ there is no evidence to suggest that there was impurity associated with childbirth that would warrant delivery outside of the house. It seems more likely that this or other types of ritual space would

²⁶ For the wochenlaube as possible birth space see: E. Brunner-Traut, “Die Wochenlaube,” 19-20; J. Toivari-Viitala, *Women at Deir el Medina*, 175; G. Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 83; R. Janssen and J. J. Janssen, *Growing up in Ancient Egypt*, 4.

²⁷ E. Brunner-Traut, “Die Wochenlaube,” 11-30.

²⁸ For references to the wochenlaube structure in temple mammisi of the Greco-Roman period, see *ibid.*

²⁹ Brunner-Traut, “Die Wochenlaube,” 20.

³⁰ This possibility will be discussed in Chapter 7.

have been constructed and protected in the house. As B. Lesko notes, “there is no indication that childbirth was regarded as something so disgusting women had to risk their health and that of their baby to avoid contaminating the males of the family by living on a windswept roof of their house during the postpartum period.”³¹ Lesko does note, however, that as a temporary structure, the *wochenlaube* may have been utilized for the actual birth or birth related rituals.³²

It is quite possible that the birth arbor scenes were meant to model the birth space of Isis. Whether or not they were truly constructed is unknown, but we can assume that women and their families would have attempted to create some type of mythically imbued and protected space. An important element of this space may have been its ability to call on or mirror the birth space of Isis. Held up by papyrus columns and roofed in convolvulus,³³ the arbors suggest a marsh setting. By creating this myth-mirroring marsh space, and potentially through other spells and rituals, the woman bearing her child would be transfigured into the goddess. Possibly used in conjunction with this space, evidence for divine transfiguration can be seen in material culture remains. The Middle Kingdom birth brick of Reniseneb, for example, depicts both the birthing mother and her attendants not as mortal women, but with the blue hair of goddesses.³⁴ This

³¹ B. Lesko, “Household and Domestic Religion in Ancient Egypt,” in *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity*, ed. J. P. Bodel and S. M. Olyan (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 206.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Opening its flowers with the rising sun, convolvulus was a symbol of the marsh as well as birth, fertility, and rebirth.

³⁴ J. Wegner “A Decorated Birth-Brick from South Abydos,” 447-496.

transfiguration was meant to protect Reniseneb and ensure a safe birthing scenario. Additionally, certain terracotta female figurines, which have been found to have traces of blue hair and in some cases, the bovine ears of Hathor, may have also functioned to transform a woman into a goddess to ensure successful birth or rebirth of her children. Since these figures have been found in domestic contexts,³⁵ it is highly possible that these figures were part of medico-magical and magical transfiguration spells of birth.³⁶ Though it is unknown if these figures were used in spells that related to this myth-mirroring space, it seems clear that ritual space was not the only means for divine transfiguration.

Another interesting aspect of this myth-mirroring space is the inclusion of convolvulus in the arbor. Convolvulus, possibly designated by the term *snwti*,³⁷ grows around papyrus in marshy areas and it can be seen not only in birth arbors, but it also appears decorating the lids of coffins³⁸ and in tomb offerings scenes (to both gods and individuals), where the plant is most often held in the hand or part of offering bouquets.³⁹ It is quite possible that while this plant had important symbolic associations with the marsh, it may have also been used in

³⁵ See G. Pinch, *Childbirth and Female Figurines at Deir el-Medina*, 405-414.

³⁶ Personal communication with J. Wegner.

³⁷ L. Manniche, *An Ancient Egyptian Herbal* (London: The British Museum Press, 1989), 85.

³⁸ Both the coffin of the wife of Sennedjem at Deir el Medina (TT1) and that of Hatshepsut, a 21st dynasty chantress of Amun, feature convolvulus.

³⁹ Convolvulus is found depicted in a variety of Theban tombs including TT16, TT85, TT139, TT217, TT277, TT296, and TT343, as well as at Amarna in the tomb of Panehesy. It is also of note that those who hold the convolvulus often grasp it like a menat or sistra, and it can even be seen intertwined in sistra themselves.

birth practices that caused it to be represented both in birth space and rebirth space. *Convolvulus* has been shown to be a source of ergot alkaloids, which can cause uterine contractions. It is unknown if this property of the plant was known to the Egyptians, but it may have been used in the ancient world for this purpose.⁴⁰ If so, it could have been used to start birth by bringing on contractions and/or in the postpartum period to help contract the uterus to its normal size.⁴¹ Thus, it is possible that the Egyptians invoked the symbolic connotations of the marsh with *convolvulus* in birth space décor, but the plant may also have served an important medicinal purpose.

It is also possible that elements that mirrored or called on the birth of the sun may have been part of creating and protecting birth space. As with becoming Isis for delivery, the woman could also become Nut or Hathor. By being associated with these mother goddesses, who delivered the sun each day with success, the expectant mother could hope a similar successful birthing outcome for both herself and her child. As J. Wegner has shown, the Middle Kingdom birth brick of Reniseneb does just this, being itself a visual spell of divine transfiguration that renders both the mother and her attendants as Hathor, and it also associates her child with the morning sun.⁴² Additionally, the solar birth

⁴⁰ For use of *convolvulus* in ancient and modern birth practice see A. M. Puleo, "The Obstetrical Use in Ancient and Early Modern Times of *Convolvulus Scammonia* or Scammony: Another Non-fungal Source of Ergot Alkaloids?" *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 1 (1979): 193-195.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, and personal communication with Dr. Lewis Wall.

⁴² For a detailed discussion of this imagery and the possible actual construction of these standards in birth space, see J. Wegner, "A Decorated Birth Brick from South Abydos," 458-463. Notably, in support of this idea, Wegner also states that in a personal

symbolism, represented by Hathor-headed standards on sycamore trees,⁴³ may reflect practices carried out in actual birth space and birth ritual.

Unfortunately, even with these snippets of textual and pictorial evidence, little is known about real birth space. If birth did take place in the home, which it likely did, one must remember that residences in ancient Egypt varied over time, by location, and mostly by socioeconomic status. Egyptian women would have given birth in houses that ranged from palaces to one-room houses, with many sizes and layouts in between. Thus, it is hard to generalize how birth space was selected and/or constructed. However, based on the descriptions of the birth of the gods, it can be assumed that women and their families would have selected the space within their homes that could best protect them. This could have been done creating a special birth room in a palace, by selecting secluded rooms at the back of the house, or cordoning off a specific birth area within the main and only room of a smaller house.

communication with G. Pinch that Pinch suggested that these Hathor headed standards may have been part of real world birth practice, *ibid.*, 459.

⁴³ In myth, the sun is often recorded as travelling through the eastern gate of the sky grabbing on to or going towards two sycamore trees. In the Pyramid Texts, the king travels towards rebirth and is said that he “will seize the two sycamores that are between (here and) the other side of the sky. They will ferry him and put him in yonder eastern side of the sky.” Translation of Pyramid Text 568, an ascension spell, J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 176. These trees, likely associated with Hathor in her form as “Lady of the Sycamore,” are also seen in both the Coffin Texts 159 and 161 and in the Book of the Dead, Chapters 109 and 149, where the deceased is said to (very similarly in all CT and BoD instances noted above) “know those two trees of turquoise between which Re goes forth, which have grown up at the Supporters of Shu at that gate of the Lord of the East which Re goes forth.” Translation of Chapter 109 of the Book of the Dead, a spell for knowing the souls of the Easterners, from R. O. Faulkner et al., 113. Additionally, these trees of Hathor, which straddle the eastern horizon, are also depicted at the sun’s birth from Nut at Hathor’s temple at Dendera, published in F. Daumas, “Sur trois représentations de Nout à Dendera,” *Annals du service des antiquités de l’Egypte* 51(1950), plate 1.

“She Caused Me to See the Birth of the God”

With such importance being placed on protecting birth space, watching a woman labor and the birth of a child was likely only permitted for the most trusted. It is likely that both mother and child were most susceptible to malignant magic and malevolent beings during this period and being near a child's birth space or watching the birth likely gave the witnesses special knowledge and power. Coffin Text 759 hints at the power of witnessing a birth when the deceased explains his power as being able to see the birth of others but protecting his own birth from witnesses. The text states explicitly “It is I who see [your] births, but you do not see [my] birth.”⁴⁴

It is unknown if fathers, or men in general, were allowed in birth space. It may be possible that men of the family could be around a laboring woman, but may not have been present for the actual birth. In Papyrus Westcar, Rawoser is in the house with Rudjedet while she labors, and he is distraught over her pain. When the divine birth attendants come to the door, Rawoser says to them: “My ladies, look, it is the woman who is in pain; her labor is difficult.”⁴⁵ But, once the divine attendants attend to Rudjedet, they lock” themselves “in” and it was only after the birth that they “came out”⁴⁶ to announce the children to Rawoser. This may, but does not necessarily, mean that Rudjedet is in a sanctioned space where her husband is not allowed.

⁴⁴ Translation of Coffin Text 759, a spell for knowing the paths of Re, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts II*, 291.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Similarly, as we have already seen in one magical spell from Papyrus Leiden I 348, Horus comes to a husband who is distraught over his wife's suffering in childbirth. Horus finds the man calling out and weeping and says:

I am Horus! I have come down from the desert, being thirsty, on the shouting, <I> found somebody calling, who stood weeping. His wife nearing her time (?). I made the calling one stop his weeping – the woman shouted to the man for a dwarf-statue of clay –: “come let somebody betake himself to Hathor, mistress of Dendera, in order that there may be brought to you her amulet of health and that she may cause to give birth the one who is to give birth!”⁴⁷

In this situation, it seems that the husband was in close enough proximity to his wife to hear her call out for a dwarf amulet, but was also able to leave the house to fetch it. This suggests as with the birth of Rudjedet, that the husband may have been in the house, but may not have been needed or allowed in the birth space. Additionally, it is of note that in this, Khnum is in the room with Rudjedet during her labor and birth. Though he is there to “give health”⁴⁸ to the limbs of the children⁴⁹ he is locked in the room with the other attendants.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Translation of Papyrus Leiden I 348, spell 31 from J. F. Borghouts *Papyrus Leiden I 348*, 29.

⁴⁸ Translation of Papyrus Westcar from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 220-221.

⁴⁹ This role of Khnum will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

⁵⁰ H. Goedicke has argued that Khnum is not in the room with the female goddesses during the birth. He suggests that the statement “Khnum gave health to his body” is an expression and grammatically linked to the statements of fate that Meskhenet makes for the royal children. It is my opinion, however, Khnum is in the room with Rudjedet and the goddesses. Though Rawoser addresses “my ladies” when he talks to the women as they enter the house, he is speaking to them of the woman's pain and labor. Khnum seems to be in the room not for the labor itself, but to give health to the children as they are born. Additionally, when the divine attendants exit the birth space, the text states that the “gods” exit. If it were only female goddesses, one would expect “goddesses” here. For Goedicke's argument, see Rudjet's Delivery,” 24-26.

There is no textual or archaeological evidence to suggest that men were not permitted to enter or be in birth space. While the fluids that came with childbirth may have been “unclean” and/or magically potent or dangerous, it is almost certain that people involved in the process had a way in which to ritually cleanse themselves to avoid danger. We see that Rudjedet purifies herself for 14 days after the birth of her children, but nowhere in the text does it say that she is in seclusion or prevented from being in other parts of her house or around her husband or other family members.⁵¹ Based on the intimate nature of the examinations and prescriptions in the gynecological and obstetric texts, it is sure that formally trained medical practitioners, most likely male, would have been exposed to these fluids and parts of the female body. Though it is unknown in what type of scenarios male medical practitioners would have been involved in childbirth, whether in common or emergency situations, male medical practitioners likely came in contact with women in childbirth. In fact, it is likely that men, both men of the household and medico-magical and religious practitioners were more intimately involved with birth than has been previously suggested.

Though we do not know exactly who would have been privy to the event of childbirth, we do know that if a person was able to see or be near the birth of a child, it implied a special position of closeness or trust on behalf of the parents,

⁵¹ For roughly the first two weeks after delivery there is a heavy, but gradually decreasing, flow of discharge from the uterus called lochia. Because lochia includes blood, mucus and placental tissue, it would not be surprising that Egyptian women would have engaged in frequent cleaning or purification to remove the fluid that would have been flowing from their bodies for the first 14 days following childbirth. It is also possible that in this text the purification refers to the actual fluid itself coming for a 14-day period. Since menstrual periods could be referred to euphemistically as a time of purification, this could also be the case for the period of time where there is a heavy lochial flow which required cleaning.

divine or human. In Coffin Text 312, when the deceased gains access from Isis to her “secret mysteries” and “hidden secrets,” the goddess allows the deceased to see the birth of Horus. The text states, “I have come forth from it to the House of Isis, to the secret mysteries, I have been conducted to her hidden secrets, for she caused me to see the birth of the god.”⁵² In the physical world, being in the house that a person was born in seems to be a way to express familiarity. In a letter from Deir el Medina,⁵³ the author notes, “While I was in the house, you were born” to stress familiarity with the family.

“We Understand Childbirth”

From Papyrus Westcar, we have the most detailed information on the attendants of birth. When Rudjedet’s labor starts, as we have seen, Re sends five gods to assist the woman birth her children. The story states:

On one of those days Rudeddet felt the pangs and her labor was difficult. Then said the majesty of Re, lord of Sakhbu, to Isis, Nephthys, Meskhenet, Heket, and Khnum: “Please go, deliver Rudeddet of the three children who are in her womb, who will assume this beneficent office in this whole land.”⁵⁴

Most notably, when the gods go to visit Rudjedet, they “set out, having changed their appearance to dancing girls, with Khnum as their porter.” When they reach the house, they are immediately recognized by Rawoser as birth assistants as “They held out to him their necklaces and sistra” and said “Let us see her. We

⁵² Translation of Coffin Text 312, spell for becoming a falcon, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, 229.

⁵³ Letter from P. Bibliotheque Nationale 198. Translation from J. Toivari-Viitala, *Women at Deir el-Medina*, 173.

⁵⁴ Translation of Papyrus Westcar from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 220.

understand childbirth." Though the gods obviously needed to be in disguise to visit Rudjedet, it is significant that they choose to be dressed as dancing girls and they identify themselves as birth attendants by holding out their menat necklaces⁵⁵ and sistra.⁵⁶ Dancing, music, clapping, and other noise making were important parts of Egyptian religious culture,⁵⁷ and it is possible that these activities would have occurred at a birth to call gods, ward off evil spirits, and/or provide psychological relief to the woman in labor.

For Egyptian women, it is likely that birth was assisted by female relatives, and possibly by other birth attendants who had special knowledge of birthing situations. While a woman can give birth alone or with just one attendant, it seems clear that at least two attendants would have been desired to assist the parturient woman. Though women, in some cases, had birth stools or bricks to sit or lean on, labor is long and hard, and many women choose to walk, squat, or be held from behind to ease the pain of labor and use gravity to hasten the coming

⁵⁵ The menat necklace may be a representation of the uterus. The beaded necklace portion could easily represent the circular womb and the counterpose bears a striking resemblance to the neck of the womb and the cervical opening. Tellingly, in one Late Period example of a counterpose (Freer Sackler Museum F1907.28a-b), the vulture mother goddess Mut, whose name literally means mother, appears at the top of the counterpose. The counterposes most often bear the image of Hathor or Sekhmet, two deities that both were involved in birth culture. And in some cases the imagery of Horus being born in the marsh, often on a birth brick and/or protected by uraei, appears at the circular (cervical looking) bottom of the counterpose. For examples of Horus in this position, see counterposes Metropolitan Museum of Art, catalog no. 41.160.104 and no. 08.202.15.

⁵⁶ The sistrum, too, bears a striking resemblance both to the uterus and to the sign for the uterus, F45. Since the sistrum, like the menat, was shaken to ward away evil, it could be possible that this practice originated as birth practice and was later appropriated to rituals of renewal for the king and rebirth for the deceased.

⁵⁷ For the role of chantresses in Egyptian religious culture see S. Onstine, *The Role of the Chantress (Ḥmꜣyt) in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2005), 11-19.

of the child. Thus, it is likely that in ideal situations, a laboring woman had at least two attendants with her: one behind to support her body, and one in front to check the progress of her labor and receive the child. These women may have massaged the parturient woman with oil, and in many cases may have been trained or had gained the life knowledge to engage in birth-hastening practices and the recitation of spells to ease and quicken labor.⁵⁸

When Isis's labor began, she would have been safely in her sanctioned and protected birth space, graced with divine attendants who would have attended to her needs. Mortal women likely hoped for a similar scenario. Creating myth-mirroring birth space, either through the construction of a birth arbor and/or through other items that had potent mythic symbolism, women would have hoped to have the protection of mother goddesses like Isis, or, better, to become these divinities during their labors. Once their labors began to progress, hopefully they were in their safe space with competent and experienced birth attendants.

⁵⁸ These practices will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7.

Chapter 6 “Come and Go Forth on the Earth:” Accelerating Birthgiving

*Come and go forth on the earth that I may give adoration to you.
The retainers of your father Osiris will serve you; I will make your name when you
have reached the horizon having passed the battlements of the Mansion of Him
Whose Name is Hidden. Power comes forth from within my vagina, striking
power arrived in my vagina,¹ and when striking power comes to its
limit...sunshine sails.²*

Protected in Chemmis, Isis’s labor advanced to its final stages. When her time of bearing was near, she called on the unborn child within her womb. She promised her divine progeny retainers and a name, coaxing the child outward. Just as her powerful contractions reach their height, Horus joined her by coming forth upon the earth.

For mortal women, the outcome of Isis’s labor was ideal. The late stage of labor, with strong unyielding contractions, was understood as necessary to force the child out of the womb. And though painful, labor could be quickened not only by calling to the child in the womb, but also through spells that called on the amniotic sac, the placenta, and the uterus. If the woman was fortunate, when her contractions reached their pinnacle, just like Isis, she would be able to bring the child forth onto the earth.

“The Woman Who Is In Pain”

In Egyptian culture, labor was understood to be painful for the mother, and possibly even for the child. Understood as a fight between life and death, labor

¹ In the text the use of the Egyptian term *jwḥ*, “flesh,” used twice, is most likely a euphemism for vagina. This term is found in both Papyrus Ebers 831 and Papyrus Smith 20 to designate the vagina.

² Author’s translation of Coffin Text 148, a spell for taking shape as a falcon.

was a battle of order over chaos. With the woman literally fighting for her life and that of the child, it is not surprising that labor could be described in terms of pain and violence, and that the labor of women was also used metaphorically and comparatively to describe painful situations.

Most clearly, in Papyrus Westcar, we are told that labor was hard and painful. During Rudjedet's labor she is described as "the woman who is in pain," and it was noted that "her labor" was "difficult."³ While labor is generally painful, sources show that the Egyptians correctly attributed the pain of labor, at least partially, to the contractions that the mother's uterus produced to move the child from the womb through the vaginal canal. These painful bursts were described in Coffin Text 148 as the "striking power" which, when they "reach their limit," forced Horus to be born, or, in the spell, when "sunshine sails."⁴

Contractions, especially in late labor, come powerfully and in rapid succession, which can be excruciating for the mother. In addition to causing pain for the mother, they may have also been understood to be violent against the fetus. In Coffin Text 84, when the deceased is reborn, his mother Sheshat "who is pregnant" with him, is said to be "angry" and to "stab" at him in the womb. This "stabbing," or literally the contractions, cause the deceased to be born, as just after the contractions the deceased states: "I have made the front (*sšd*) which is between her thighs as Him whose head is raised; I have issued between the

³ Translation of Papyrus Westcar from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 220.

⁴ The statement "sunshine sails" in the spell is a metaphor for the arrival of Horus that relates Horus's birth to the birth of the morning sun from the sky goddess, Nut.

thighs of Isis as Horus.”⁵ Here the contractions of the uterus are described in terms of violence coming from the mother, who stabs at the child to force him out between her thighs. This description suggests that the forceful tightening of the uterus was regarded as painful for the child. Since long or traumatic labors can cause distress and injury to the fetus, this description, and the concept behind it, is not surprising.

In addition to labor and contractions being described in painful and violent terms, it seems clear that women were permitted to experience the pain of labor through yelling and screaming. In some cultures, screaming or vocalizing pain is not socially acceptable and can have serious consequences for the mother and her child.⁶ However, it does not seem that women were forbidden from verbally experiencing labor and birth. In more than one case women are noted as crying out during labor and/or when their child arrives. In two of the magical spells of Papyrus Leiden I 348, women call out for divine assistance during their time of bearing. In Spell 33, the parturient woman cries out to Hathor to come visit her in

⁵ Translation of Coffin Text 84, a spell for becoming Nehebakhu in the realm of the dead, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, 88-89.

⁶ Various ethnographic studies have shown that in some societies, women are not permitted to make sounds, or if they do, it can be detrimental to their labor or to their unborn child. M. Kay has noted, for example, that at the time the case studies were done in the volume she edited on birth practices, Mexican women were told not to open their mouths in labor to prevent their uterus from rising up and Navajo women maintained silence and motionlessness in labor to keep their labor secret. M. Kay, *Anthropology of Human Birth* (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1982), 16.

her birth pavilion.⁷ Similarly, in Spell 31, we see that the woman who was “nearing her time” “shouted” to her husband “for dwarf-statue of clay”.⁸

Additionally, as the child emerged from the vagina, women may have let out a distinctive scream or cry that stood out from the other sounds made earlier in their labors. While it is hard to know if this was just a common cry due to the force necessary to push the child forth, or some combination of the pain, relief, and success of childbirth, evidence of this cry comes from a variety of funerary texts. Earliest, in the Pyramid Texts, we find that at the moment of the king’s rebirth Nut issues a cry. Pyramid Text 669 states: “[The waters in Nu have been cut at the sound of] the scream of [Nut, the mother of] Pepi [Neferkare, when she gave birth to him]”⁹ In Coffin Text 1029 Nut’s voice “clears the way” for Re to be born. The text states: “May trembling befall the eastern horizon of the sky at the voice of Nut as she clears the way for Re, before the Great One (Re) so that he may make the circuit.”¹⁰ This suggests that Nut issues a cry when Re comes forth, signaling his birth.

A few additional snippets may also reflect this practice of crying out when the child emerges. Though Coffin Text 989 is not complete, it states that action

⁷ Translation of spell 33 from J. F. Borghouts, *The Magical Spells of Papyrus Leiden I 348*, 30.

⁸ Translation of spell 31 from Papyrus Leiden I 348, *ibid.*, 29.

⁹ Translation of Pyramid Text 669, an ascension and rebirth spell, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 266.

¹⁰ Translation of Coffin Text 1029, a spell of rebirth, from L. Lesko, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of Two Ways*, 11-13.

was taken “at the sound of the cry of my mother [...] who bore [me(?)...].”¹¹

Chapter 159 from The Book of the Dead may also support this hypothesis. When the deceased is reborn, he is addressed as “O you who have come forth today from the god’s house” and his mother is “She whose voice is loud goes round about from the door of the Two Houses.”¹² This, too, may be a reference to the noise the deceased’s mother makes at the time of his rebirth. With no prohibition from sound-making in labor, it seems that a specific, possibly louder, crying or screaming by the birthing mother was not only common when the child moved forth to the earth, but also signaled a successful birth.

Interestingly, it may not have only been the mother who cried out during labor and at the birth. Attendants of the birth, or others present in the house, may have let out a cry during or after the child arrived. Whether there were cries of protection, joy, or victory is unclear. One spell for speeding the birth notes that the goddesses rejoice when the child is born. Sekhmet is mentioned as foremost of the goddesses, and her cries, as a goddess of war and violence, are notable. The text tells us: “A sound has come into existence during the formations (?), the sound of the cries of Sachmet, rejoicing in the Palace!”¹³ This may again suggest that birth was seen as a battle, and as such, when successful, was celebrated

¹¹ Translation of Coffin Text 989, a spell for becoming a falcon, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts III*, 98.

¹² Translation of Chapter 159 of the Book of the Dead, a spell for an amulet of green feldspar, from R. O. Faulkner et al., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 125.

¹³ Translation of spell 29 of Papyrus Leiden I 348 from J. F. Borghouts, *The Magical Spells of Papyrus Leiden I 348*, 28.

with the cries of a goddess of war. If enacted in the mortal realm, we can assume these cries issued forth from the birth attendants or those present in the house.

Not surprisingly, in a culture that understood the experience of labor to be painful and violent, difficult or agonizing situations could be likened to labor. When a Deir el Medina man transgressed against Meretseger, he believed the goddess was punishing him. He described his misconduct and its outcome: “I did not know good from bad when I made a transgression against the Peak, and she punished me, I being in her hand night and day. I sat on a brick like a pregnant woman while I called out for breath without its coming to me.”¹⁴ The punishment enacted by the goddess caused the man to be in such pain that he was like a woman in labor, suffering while squatting on the bricks.

In *The Satire of Trades*, when the author speaks of undesirable jobs, he notes that “The weaver in the workshop, He is worse off than a woman: With knees against his chest, He cannot breathe air.”¹⁵ This comment suggests that the position and pain of labor was recognized as something quite awful, but the weaver was in a worse situation, being in the position of labor for a period of time each day. He is thus “worse off than a woman,” who presumably is only in this position for a relatively short time, comparatively. Hopefully, the woman, unlike the weaver, would have spells to speed up the process and relieve her uncomfortable position and pain.

¹⁴ Translation of the Neferabu Stela, Turin N. 50058, from A. McDowell, *Village Life in Ancient Egypt*, 98.

¹⁵ Translation of *The Satire of The Trades* from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 188.

“Accelerating the Birthgiving of Isis”

Though the successful delivery of a child was a “joyous occasion” or a “happy hour,” until the child arrived, women would have combated both fear and pain. Thus, in ideal situations, birth attendants would have been armed with spells and remedies that were believed to speed labor and ease psychological and physical distress. Like the recitations and spells used to protect the mother, child, and birth space during the period of pregnancy, labor spells invoked divine patrons of women, children, and childbirth, as well as the divine and successful birth scenarios such as the birth of Horus and the sun god, Re. In these invocations, invitations to deities to aid or join women in their birth space were issued, and even the unborn child could be called upon to join his or her mother. Spells used to open the uterus, as well as those that directly called on the amniotic fluid and placenta to come forth were also employed.

When Isis passed the appropriate time for bearing Horus, she threatened the gods to deliver her son to her. Luckily, they heeded her threat and Horus was successfully birthed in Chemmis. Her situation was described and appropriated in a magical spell to either start or accelerate the birth giving of mortal women:

[Another] spell of accelerating the birth giving of Isis. “Oh Re and Aton, oh gods who are in [heaven, go]ds who are in the land of Amente and coun[cil of gods who] judge this entire land, coun[cil of gods who are in the Palace (??)] of On and who are in Leto-polis, come you! Isis is suffering from her backpart, being pregnant – but her months have been completed, according to the (set) number in pregnancy – with her son, Horus, the protector of his father!¹⁶

¹⁶ Translation of spell 34 of Papyrus Leiden I 348 from J. F. Borghouts, *The Magical Spells of Papyrus Leiden I 348*, 31.

For the mortal woman, the magical practitioner reissued Isis's threat, a threat that likened the delay of birth to the extreme chaos of storms and the delay of the inundation:

If she spends [her] time without giving birth, you will stand dumbfounded, oh Ennead! For then there will be no heaven, for then there will be no earth, for then there will be no five epagomenal days, for then there will be no offerings for any of the gods in On, there will arise a weariness in the southern heaven, a disturbance will break out in the northern heaven and lamenting in the chapel! Shu will not rise, Hapi will not flow when he should flow forth at his time! It is not me who says it and it is not me who repeats it – it is Isis who says it, she repeats it to you! For she spends (already) a time without her son being born, Horus, the protector of his father!¹⁷

Finally, the mortal woman's connection with Isis was solidified when the magical practitioner stated at the end of his spell "Be careful with the birthgiving of NN, daughter of NN, in the same manner!"¹⁸ The woman had become powerful, like Isis, and her child would be delivered to her in a timely and safe manner, just like Horus.

Calling on the aid of the gods themselves could also quicken a woman's labor. As we have seen, in Papyrus Leiden I 348, Spell 33, Hathor's presence is requested in the birthing pavilion by the parturient woman: "*Rejoicing, rejoicing in heaven, in heaven! Birth giving is accelerated! Come to me, Hathor, my mistress, in my fine pavilion, in this happy hour.*"¹⁹ In Papyrus Leiden I 348, Spell 33 Hathor is invoked, with a variety of other gods to "lay her hand on her with an

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Translation of spell 33 of Papyrus Leiden I 348 from J. F. Borghouts, *The Magical Spells of Papyrus Leiden I 348*, 30.

amulet of health!"²⁰ Additionally, this spell invokes other deities helpful to the ailing women, calling: "Sepertunes, wife of Horus, Nechet, the Nubian, the Eastern one, Unut, mistress of Unut" to "come to do what you can do!" Though few of these spells calling the gods to speed childbirth survive, it is certain that the same gods that protected women in pregnancy were invoked in a variety of ways and spells to protect and ease labor.

Just as the gods could be invoked to come to the place of birth to aid the woman, the unborn child could be called to come and join the mother and the birth attendants. In Coffin Text 148 Isis calls to Horus that he "Go upon earth" so that she may give him "praise."²¹ Looking at the tone of the spell, this statement is likely more magically charged and forceful than it looks at first glance. In similar birthing scenarios, the child is conjured or magically called to come forth. In fact, in Papyrus Westcar, Isis again has the power to call forth children in the womb. Invoking and playing on their names, Isis calls the triplets of Rudjedet to come forth. To the first she said: "Don't be so mighty in her womb, you whose name is 'Mighty.'" To the second she said: "Don't tread in her womb, you whose name is 'Tread-of-Re!'" To the last she said: "Don't be so dark in her womb, you whose name is 'Dark!'" Clearly using the power of the child's name to have power over it, she brings the children out of the womb. After each powerful invocation "the child slid into her arms, a child of one cubit, strong boned, his limbs overlaid

²⁰ Translation of Spell 31 of Papyrus Leiden I 348 from *ibid.*, 29.

²¹ Author's translation of Coffin Text 148, a spell for taking shape as a falcon.

with gold, his headdress of true lapis lazuli.”²² Though this calling of the children’s names and word play was part of the prophecy in the story, given Isis’s powerful magic, and her ability to invoke true names, it would not be surprising if magical practitioners, in the guise of Isis, used such methods during labor to bring children forth from their mothers.

In addition to calling children out of the womb by speech, there may have also been incantations that were said over amulets to conjure children from the wombs of their mothers. One spell from Papyrus Leiden I 348, which appears in a series of birth spells for speeding labor, is said “*to be recited*” over an item, unfortunately missing in name from the text, though likely an amulet, which is to be “*in her right hand.*” The text of the spell itself is “*A spell of conjuring with it the one who lies down in you.*”²³ As J. F. Borghouts noted, this spells seems to refer to conjuring forth the child who *šdr* “lies down” *jm.t* “in you,” where “in you” is feminine, and thus referring to the mother.²⁴

Another important element of labor may have been the ritual opening of the uterus. In The Great Hymn to Khnum, Khnum is one who has power over not only over the wombs of women, but also that he opens them at his will. The hymn says Khnum “makes women give birth when the womb is ready, So as to

²² Translation of Papyrus Westcar from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 220.

²³ Spell 32 of Papyrus Leiden I 348, translation from J. F. Borghouts, *The Magical Spells of Papyrus Leiden I 348*, 29-30.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, also notes no. 383 and 384.

open as he wishes.”²⁵ And, spell 28 from Papyrus Leiden I 348, which was used to accelerate labor, likens the parturient women to Hathor and orders her uterus to open:

*Another spell of accelerating birthgiving. Open for me! I am the one whose offering is great, the builder who built the pylon for Hathor, the mistress of Dendera, who lifts up²⁶ in order that she may give birth! Hathor, the mistress of Dendera, is the one who is giving birth! This spell is to be recited for a woman.*²⁷

Once the womb was opened, spells that called on other entities involved with the fetus, such as the amniotic sac or the placenta, could be used with the purpose of speeding labor. Since the waters of the amniotic sac often come forth from a gravid woman just before or during her labor it is not surprising that the Egyptians would have called upon this fluid to come forth from a woman who had passed her time of bearing or had a protracted birth. In addition to the waters that can appear before or during labor, the placenta comes forth from the woman shortly after the child appears. Though not signaling labor in the same way as the rupturing waters of the amniotic sac, it stands to reason that the Egyptians believed that calling on this entity, too, could speed a woman’s labor.

In Papyrus Leiden I 348, Spell 29, along with the cries of the war goddess, Sekhmet, we see that Isis, and possibly Thoth, are called to force forth the waters of birth so that the child can be born:

²⁵ Translation of The Great Hymn to Khnum, M. Lichtheim, *The Late Period*, 112.

²⁶ The phrase “who lifts up” likely refers to Hathor raising herself on brick or a stool to give birth.

²⁷ Translation of spell 28 of Papyrus Leiden I 348 from J. F. Borghouts, *The Magical Spells of Papyrus Leiden I 348*, 28.

A sound has come into existence during the formations (?), the sound of the cries of Sachmet, rejoicing in the Palace!descend..... in gladness, all goddesses rejoice! Be welcome, you, heading them! Come, descend with a satisfied heart, you too who created their name <s>. (you), the one who is with the lord of life in the Palace, while the Great One remains in her place! – Eject the liquids of the she-ass to there (??); they belong to him-of-the-she-ass which has no face.²⁸

The amniotic fluid here is called “the liquids of the she-ass” who belong to “him-of-the-she-ass.” Because Seth himself had a violent and early birth, he was associated with not just the waters of birth, which at an early time could signal chaos, but possibly also with the opening and closing of the uterus. In this case, the waters, though called forth at an appropriate time for bearing, are still associated with this god and his consort the “she-ass.”

The placenta was likely intimately associated with the child during gestation, birth, and possibly even in life. In ideal birthing situations, when the placenta does not stay attached or break off in the womb, it issues forth from the parturient women shortly after her child is born. In Egyptian culture this important organ could be referred to as the child’s twin; it may have been given special consideration and burial.²⁹ Not surprisingly, as with the child and the amniotic fluid, this entity could be called forth to speed labor.

In the “spell of the dwarf” from Papyrus Leiden 1 348, we have seen that Bes is called forth by Horus the Conjuror to speed the birth and assist with the

²⁸ Translation of spell 29 of Papyrus Leiden I 348 from J. F. Borghouts, *The Magical Spells of Papyrus Leiden I 348*, 28.

²⁹ For more on the placenta see A. Blackman, “The Pharaoh’s Placenta and the Moon God Khonsu,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 3.4 (1916): 235-249 and “Some Remarks on an Emblem upon the Head of an Ancient Egyptian Birth Goddess.” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 3 (1916), 199-206.

call to the placenta: “Come down placenta, come down, placenta, come down! I am Horus who conjures in order that she who is occupied with birthgiving becomes better than she was, as if she were (already) delivered!”³⁰ And, though a spell from Papyrus London³¹ is unfortunately damaged, it begins “Invocation [for] her placenta,” showing that the Leiden spell is not an isolated example of this type of incantation used to bring forth the placenta. Since the expulsion of the placenta is such an important part of safe delivery, it is likely that Egyptians would have taken great care to make sure that the placental tissue came forth.

“Loosening a Child in the Womb of a Woman”

In addition to the spells that called on deities, the unborn child, the placenta, and amniotic fluid, other spells and remedies would have also been employed to ease labor and speed birth. There is evidence to suggest that the child was seen as “bound” in the woman.³² In early pregnancy, this was a good thing. The binding that held a child within a woman’s womb was necessary and was encouraged through the employment of amulets and spells. However, when it was time for the child to be born, these fetters may have needed to be released or loosened, and this loosening could be achieved through a variety of different means.

³⁰ Spell 30 of Papyrus Leiden I 348, translation from J. F. Borghouts, *The Magical Spells of Papyrus Leiden I 348*, 29.

³¹ English translation of London 13 from the German of H. von Deines, H. Grapow, and W. Westendorf, *Grundriss IV*, 288.

³² The evidence of the need to loosen the child from the womb in medico-magical and magical sources will be discussed in this chapter. However, the funerary evidence for the binding and fettering of the deceased and its possible origin in real world labor and birth beliefs will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

Most notably, the medico-magical remedies from Papyrus Ebers suggest that to speed labor the child needed to be loosened from the womb. Ebers 800 begins the remedies “for loosening (*sth*) a child in the womb of a woman,”³³ and these remedies could be rubbed on, drunk by, or deposited into a woman. Both Ebers 800 and 803 call for ingredients to be combined and put on the abdomen of a woman. 800 calls for “salt from lower Egypt 1; white emmer 1; *sw.t-ḥm.t* (female rush?) 1;”³⁴ and 803 for “terebinth resin (*sntr*) 1; oil/fat 1.”³⁵ Surely the Egyptians believed there were powerful medical and/or magical properties in the ingredients they used for such a purpose. It seems possible that these remedies would have been applied through massage, which is soothing and also may have been thought to speed labor.

It is also possible that during labor bandaging of the abdominal area occurred. Though Ebers 807 does not record the site of bandaging for loosening of the child, it does explicitly state that the ingredients: “*njs*-part of a turtle 1; *ḥkwn*-beetle 1; pine tree oil (*sft*) 1; *dsr.t*-beer 1; oil/fat 1;” “shall be ground into a mass” to “use for bandaging.”³⁶ The application and tightening of bandages on the abdomen could have been thought to sympathetically bind the child. The unwinding, conversely, would release the child. Practically, they may have thought that binding the upper regions of the abdomen tightly, especially when

³³ English translation of Ebers 800 from the German of H. von Deines, H. Grapow, and W. Westendorf, *Grundriss IV*, 278.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ English translation of Ebers 803 from the German, *ibid.*

³⁶ English translation of Ebers 807 from the German, *ibid.*, 279.

combined with magical compounds, could force the child out of the womb. It is also possible that the compounds used would have provided relief to sore areas of a parturient woman's body, thereby relaxing her and speeding her labor.

Along with child loosening rubs, elixirs could be employed to start or speed labor. Ebers 801 calls for the parturient woman to drink the extracts of "fresh *hmꜣj.t*-legumes combined with honey" for "one day."³⁷ And, in Ebers 804 equal parts of *njꜣjꜣ*-plant 1; *qsntj* 1; wine 1;" are called to be mixed and consumed by the woman for four days.³⁸ In Ebers 805 *išd*-fruit 1 and *ḏsr.t*-beer 1"³⁹ are combined into a remedy to be poured into the vagina.

In addition to liquid remedies poured into the vagina, suppositories of a thicker nature were used to be put directly into the vagina to loosen children from the womb. In Ebers 802 "*bsbs*-plant 1; terebinth resin (*sntr*) 1; onions 1; *ḏsr.t*-beer 1; fresh *hmꜣj.t*-legumes; fly droppings 1" are combined before they are "put into her vulva."⁴⁰ And, in Ebers 806 "juniper fruits (*wꜥn*) 1; *njꜣjꜣ*-plant 1; pine resin (*ꜥḏ*) 1; were combined and put "into her vagina (*iwf*)."⁴¹

Further, it is likely that magical practices were enacted to loosen children from the wombs of their mothers. In terms of birth space, it is possible that any

³⁷ English translation of Ebers 801 from the German, *ibid.*, 278.

³⁸ English translation of Ebers 804 from the German, *ibid.*

³⁹ English translation of Ebers 805 from the German, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ English translation of Ebers 802 from the German, *ibid.*

⁴¹ If these suppositories were inserted during labor, it is of note that "they would greatly increase the chances of fatal infection when done under the conditions and with the materials available to the ancient Egyptians." Dr. Lewis wall, personal communication.

existing knots or bindings were loosened to prevent binding of the womb. Both Elisabeth Staehelin and Robert Ritner have suggested that the loosening of knots in the household may have been practiced during a woman's labor. Employing the episode from Papyrus Westcar where the expectant father, Rawoser, answers the door with his kilt in disarray, both scholars suggest that Rawoser's kilt was loose not because he was distraught over his wife's labor, but because he would have had to untied it to prevent any tightness in the house during Rudjedet's labor.⁴² Not only could knots of daily life have been removed, it would not be surprising if ritual knots could have been created in birth space, in women's clothing, and in their hair to create and release tightness through sympathetic magic.⁴³

The use of these magical and medico-magical methods likely provided powerful psychological relief to women in labor, especially to those who had long and difficult labors. As John Nunn has noted, we should not dismiss the power of medico-magical spells in the management of pain.⁴⁴ These spells likely had a very real impact on the experience of the birthing mother. With labor quickened

⁴² E. Staehelin, "Bindung und Entbindung," *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 96 (1970): 125-139; R. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1997), 114 and "Household Religion in Ancient Egypt," in *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity*, 174.

⁴³ E. Brunner-Traut, "Die Wochenlaube," 24-27.

⁴⁴ As Nunn has stated in his book on Egyptian medicine: "Suggestion and expectation of use have a measurable curative value, particularly in the relief of pain, a phenomenon known as the placebo effect. Since, in Pharaonic times, there may have been relatively few pharmacologically effective remedies, it was entirely reasonable to rely on the placebo effect which, for many conditions, would have been much better than nothing. One would expect the effect of a placebo to be greatly enhanced by the suggestion of magic and the pronouncement of an incantation." J. Nunn, *Ancient Egyptian Medicine*, 97.



and attended to by divine figures and forces, and believing she herself was Isis, the birthing mother believed she would soon see an end to the pain with the successful birth of her child.

Chapter 7

“I Have Passed Between Her Thighs:” The Emergence of the Child

I am indeed the Great Seed. I have passed between her thighs [in] this [my name] of Jackal of the Sunshine. I have broken out of the egg, I have floated(?) on its white (?), I have glided on its yolk (?) I am the Lord of blood, I am the tempestuous (?) bull.¹

While Isis labored in Chemmis, her unborn child was on a journey of his own. Horus’s passage into the world was not an easy one. Battling the dangers in the womb, he fought forward to join his mother. Victorious over the chaotic forces that sought to choke and stifle him, he glided out from the thighs of his mother on the waters of birth. With his mother’s blood staining the red linen on which he was received, Horus’s triumph over birth was hailed like the birth of the morning sun. Isis was lucky to make it through the birth unscathed; she was able to see her child appear safely, which was a triumph of her own.

Mortal children and their mothers had to engage the epic struggle of birth. Unfortunately, not all mothers and children were as lucky as Isis and Horus. Because of the difficulty and danger involved with the event of birth, the moment of emergence of the child is the most infrequently mentioned or depicted aspect of reproductive lives. Sources from the physical world are mostly mum, save for instances of the hieroglyphs for birth B3 , its variant B4 , and a few images of birth giving represented in Ptolemaic and Roman temple birth houses.² Yet,

¹ Translation of Coffin Text 334, a spell of rebirth, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, 258.

² See the mammisi constructions of Dendera, Philae, and Edfu. For an overview of these structures, see Daumas, F., *Les mammisis des temples égyptiens* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1958).

through the investigation of the events and language of rebirth of the gods and the deceased in the funerary texts, as well as the bodies of those women and children who did not make it through the perilous struggle, a picture of the journey of the child from the womb to the earth and the actual moment of birth can be painted.

“Your Mother Nut Has Given Birth to You”

The sun god Re, and the deceased in his guise, had to traverse the perilous night before rebirth in the eastern horizon each morning.³ The trip through the Duat was envisioned in a wide variety of ways throughout Egypt’s long history.⁴ However, one constant way of representing the journey in funerary texts, tomb walls, and coffins, was as a trip through the body of the sky goddess Nut. As we have seen in Chapter 2 and 3, in this version of the sun’s journey, Re impregnates his mother Nut each night by way of her mouth, and comes out from her thighs in the morning.⁵ On the one hand, this was a symbolic representation of the path of rebirth for the gods and the deceased, on the other hand, the creation and depiction of such a concept through the metaphor of a gestation and delivery gives insight into the Egyptian perception and understanding of labor and birth. The study of the sun’s journey through Nut, ending with his very literal “birth” from Nut’s body, may be more relevant than previously considered for the

³ Though referred to as the “sun god” or Re in narration, the texts surveyed also include those that feature Horus in a solar role, equating him with Re through language or context.

⁴ For an overview of the various afterworld texts, see E. Hornung, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁵ For more details and representative examples see Chapter 2, pages 30-31 and Chapter 3, pages 47-48.

purpose of understanding the trip of the child from the womb, through the pelvis and vaginal canal, and out into the physical realm.

The Egyptian sources suggest that the fetus, living in the waters of creation in the womb, began its journey of birth when the waters of birth began to flood out from around it. In normal circumstances, from the start of its mother's labor, the child generally endured a twelve-hour trip⁶ from the womb to the earth. Fighting to emerge from darkness, the unborn child eventually had to be released from the bound uterus or pelvis, avoid strangulation by his or her own umbilical cord, and emerge from the vagina to take its first breath. Similarly, Re could be envisioned as embarking upon a dangerous journey through the body of his mother each night to attain daily rebirth. Depending on the time and text, Re traverses watery darkness, combats serpents, opens sealed gates, and emerges victorious from between two mountains each morning to illuminate the horizon. Though a symbolic and ever-evolving representation of an underworld journey and rebirth, elements of Re's trip and experiences, may be reflective of Egyptian conceptions of the journey of the fetus during labor and birth, and therefore may be able to shed light on real world birth.

"The Nurse-Canal is Opened"

The night before Nut gives birth to the sun, the Pyramid Texts,⁷ the Coffin Texts,⁸ and The Book of the Dead,⁹ all reference the "great flood," or breaking of

⁶ Labor times vary greatly in women, but on average a normal labor and delivery lasts 12-14 hours. M. Stoppard, *Conception, Pregnancy and Birth* (London: DK, 2008), 273.

⁷ In the Pyramid Texts the flood, or waters of birth, that come forth from Nut on the night before the birth of the sun are noted. In utterance 249 the king is born as Re:

waters that issues from Nut when she begins her daily labor with the sun. As the sun moves through Nut towards the linen garments on which he is received, the waters must carry him towards his birth. Like an infant forced from the womb to the vaginal canal by the release of amniotic fluid and powerful contractions, it is possible that the movement of Re¹⁰ on the waters of Nun, including the flooding in the underworld and the waters and canals Re must traverse, reflect the waters that surrounded and were believed to pave the path for the child at birth. We find in the Coffin Texts that Nun, the waters of creation, have power over the rebirth of Horus:¹¹ “I am Nu, Lord of darkness; I have come that I may have power over the path.”¹² In this case, the waters of Nun are the element that clears the path for Horus, and the deceased, to be reborn.

“Unis is the one to whom belongs the linen that the uraei guard during the night of the great flood that comes from the great goddess.” Translation of Pyramid Text 249, a spell of rebirth, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 42.

⁸ Coffin Text 971 references the night the flood waters of Nut came forth with the deceased stating: “I have come to you that I may nourish your great ones [...] the keeper of linen for the uraei on the night of the great flood which issued from the Great Lady.” Translation of Coffin Text 971, a spell of protection, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts III*, 93.

⁹ In Chapter 174 of The Book of the Dead, the deceased notes he is the one who guards the birth linens of the sun on the night before he is born, after the waters of his mother Nut issue forth: “I am he who guards the linen garments which the Cobra guarded on the night of the great flood.” Translation of Chapter 174, a spell enabling a spirit to go out from the great gate of the sky, from R. O. Faulkner et al., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 130.

¹⁰ Simplified as Re, though it may be Horus and/or the deceased in the funerary texts.

¹¹ Horus identified with Re.

¹² Coffin Text 1132, a spell for having power over the path. Translation from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts III*, 170-171.

The Pyramid Texts, too, show that before Horus, and the king by association, can be ferried over to the eastern sky, water must be released to pave his way from west to the east. In Pyramid 265, for the king to be ferried like Horus “to the place where the gods were born,” first the “Nurse-canal is opened, the Winding Waterway is flooded, the Fields of Rushes¹³ are filled.”¹⁴ Pyramid Text 609 similarly notes that for the king to be reborn after descending in the west that, “The Lake of Rushes is filled, the Winding Waterway is flooded, the Nurse-canal is opened for you; you cross thereon to the horizon, to the place where the gods were born, and you were born there with them.”¹⁵ The texts suggest that without water, at least in these cases, Horus/the king would not be able to transverse the path to rebirth.¹⁶

The fact that the waters of creation exist in the underworld and seem to be believed necessary to ferry the deceased towards rebirth may reflect a belief that the fetus needed to travel on the waters of birth to reach and move through the vaginal canal.¹⁷ The centrality of flooding to travel and rebirth in the spiritual

¹³ For a more detailed exploration of the sky in the Pyramid Texts, and specifically the geography of Nut as a woman, see J. Allen, “The Cosmology of the Pyramid Texts,” in *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt*, W. K. Simpson, ed. (New Haven: Yale Egyptological Seminar, 1989), 1-28.

¹⁴ Translation of Pyramid Text 265, a spell for crossing the horizon, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 74.

¹⁵ Translation of Pyramid Text 609, a spell for crossing the horizon, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 252.

¹⁶ The importance of water at the time of the birth itself will be dealt with later in the chapter.

¹⁷ The sources suggest that the Egyptians may have believed the amniotic fluid was necessary to carry the child to the entrance of the vagina during birth. Though the

realm may also point to an understanding that once the waters of birth began to flow, birth was not just eminent, but necessary. Though the Egyptians did not understand bacterial infections, they may have understood that those births that did not occur within a day or so after the rupturing of the amniotic sac often resulted in maternal and fetal illness and death.¹⁸

“Broad Is the Way Which Does Not Embrace Snakes”

It is obvious that the Egyptians would have noticed the importance of the umbilical cord, even if they did not fully understand its workings. Attached to the placenta, the umbilical cord both brings life to the fetus, but can also take life away. Functioning as it should, the cord brings nutrients and oxygen to the fetus through the delivery of blood. However, the cord can become prolapsed or constricted during labor, choking the flow of the oxygen to the child. Though the Egyptians likely did not understand the complex workings of the umbilical cord, they would have witnessed healthy children born with their cords still pulsating with life. However, they would have also seen prolapsed cords, which can protrude through the cervix and into the vagina, and, most strikingly, they would have, on occasion, found children born still with compressed cords wrapped

amniotic fluid may provide lubrication during birth (personal communication with Dr. Lewis Wall), it is not necessary to carry a fetus towards birth.

¹⁸ After the membranes rupture and the amniotic fluid spills out, the sterile packaging in which the fetus is encased is broken and there is an increasing risk of intrauterine infection the longer labor lasts. This is particularly increased if foreign objects are inserted into the vagina, even by birth attendants with good intentions. Dr. Lewis Wall, personal communication.

dangerously around their bodies.¹⁹ Due to the cord's ability to bring death by taking away oxygen,²⁰ its length,²¹ and coiling nature, it is possible that the cord was associated with the snake.²² The battle with the cord that the fetus had to overcome may be reflected in the deceased's battling of snakes in the Duat.

It is clear in funerary culture that snakes were a threat to rebirth. As early as the inscriptions of the Pyramid Texts, snakes, even in their hieroglyphic form could have knives through their bodies to render them harmless, a practice that continued in some writing and depictions throughout Egyptian history. In the Coffin Texts, we see that the deceased seeks to avoid snakes on his path to rebirth. Coffin Text 1139 states: "Make a clean way for me, O lord of everlastingness who is in Maat. Broad is the way which does not embrace

¹⁹ Nuchal cord, where the umbilical cord wraps once around part of the fetus's body, most frequently the fetus's neck, is relatively common, occurring in roughly 20% of cases. This situation itself does not generally cause fetal demise. However, seeing babies born with cords wrapped around their necks may have led to the concept that the baby was in a struggle with the cord during labor and birth. Umbilical cord information and statistics from M. H. Beall, "Umbilical Cord Complications," *Medscape Reference*, <http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/262470-overview#aw2aab6b6> (Accessed May 1, 2012).

²⁰ Because the Egyptians would have seen stillborn babies with cords wrapped around their necks, which could have died from many things, including constricted cords, they may have perceived the cord as having the ability to choke air from the child, as it would in a breathing human.

²¹ On average, the umbilical cord is 55cm with a diameter of 1-2 cm, very similar to a snake. Umbilical cord data from M. H. Beall, "Umbilical Cord Complications."

²² Snake amulets were worn by women, and it is possible that some of these may have been associated with childbirth for apotropaic reasons to protect from snakes, or for fertility purposes in their associations with snake deities like Renenutet and the *krht* snake, but it is also possible that they had protective implications for the child and its umbilical cord.

snakes. May darkness cease and light come to be. Mine is a travelling.”²³ This spell suggests that the one whose path is clear from the threat of snakes is more easily reborn. And, as we have seen in Chapter 2, the deceased could be provided with spells to make snakes impotent or harmless.²⁴

Re not only battled snakes, but in the New Kingdom underworld books, he also had to triumph over the large snake Apophis each night before his rebirth. Chapter 39 of the Book of the Dead, which is “for repelling the Rerek-snake in the God’s Domain,” guarantees that Re is triumphant over Apophis before his rebirth:

“May he go forth, may he plunder the gods, may he rise early in front of Nut, and may Geb stand up – so says the Terrible One. The Ennead is on the move, the door of Hathor has been infringed, and Re is triumphant over Apophis.”²⁵

By the time the “door of Hathor” is “infringed,” i.e. the sun is born, it is acknowledged that Re is victorious over the snake Apophis. It is not impossible that Re’s triumph over snakes, or Apophis in the later underworld texts, may reflect an idea that a child, and by association, the deceased, can be bound by his umbilical cord, or snakes in the spiritual world, and face death before birth or rebirth. If this is the case, it shows that the Egyptians were not only aware of cord death, but feared it and hoped to protect unborn children from this threat.

²³ Translation of Coffin Text 1139, a spell having power over the path, from L. Lesko, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of Two Ways*, 31-32.

²⁴ Chapter 2, page 28.

²⁵ Translation of Book of the Dead, Chapter 39, a spell for repelling a Rerek-snake in the God’s Domain, from R. O. Faulkner et al., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 104.

“Loosing the Fetters”

In addition to being hindered by the umbilical cord, the child could also have been believed to be bound up or stuck in the uterus or pelvis. The Egyptians could have viewed long protracted labors as occurring through some binding of the child that did not allow its passage into the vaginal canal. While it is unclear if they believed this binding to be from the uterus, the pelvis, the umbilical cord, or other forces, they would have been intimately aware that a labor that went on too long could result in fetal and maternal death. Thus, it is logical that the Egyptians believed that a “bound” or “fettered” child could need loosening. As we have seen in Chapter 6, medico-magical remedies were used to loosen the child from the womb.²⁶ And, interestingly, spells were provided for the deceased to remove fetters before rebirth.

In funerary texts, Re is often referred to as “fettered” while in the Duat; he must be released from these fetters before he can be reborn. In Coffin Text 622, for example, the text reads of the deceased: “You sink into the earth to your thickness, to your middle, to <your> full span (?), you see Rēa in his fetters, you worship Rēa in the loosing from fetters by means of the amulet of the Great One who is in red linen, the Lord of Offerings.”²⁷ It seems possible that this binding could reflect the concept that the child, and by association, the deceased, is

²⁶ Papyrus Ebers, remedies 800-807, discussion in Chapter 6, 119-120.

²⁷ Translation of Coffin Text 622, a spell of rebirth, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts II*, 205.

bound and must be released prior to birth or rebirth.²⁸ In this case, Re is released by an amulet of the “Great One,” a male god in this case, who assists with the sun’s birth by using a loosening amulet. This recalls the Greco-Roman uterine amulet examined by Robert Ritner,²⁹ and this reference suggests that these amulets were used earlier in Egyptian history for loosening the child in the physical and spiritual world to cause birth or rebirth.

In another spell from the Book of the Dead, the text is more explicit on the fact that the deceased must be loosened to be reborn. In a series of pleas, the deceased asks to be released so he can be reborn. In one plea, the deceased appeals to Horus: “O Horus, son of Isis, make me hale as you made yourself hale.” The deceased goes on stating that the “One-faced lord” demands his rebirth, stating: “Release him, loose him, put him on earth, cause him to be loved.”³⁰ Though it is unknown if this appeal is to the mother, the uterus, or elements in the Duat, we again see that rebirth only comes after release from fetters. The inclusion of spells to loosen or free the sun god from his fetters in the afterlife may reflect the fear of protracted births in the physical world.

²⁸ The reading of this text is tricky. We know that Re is released from his fetters by an amulet of the Great One. What is unclear is if the Great One is one “who is in red linen,” or if the amulet is that “which is in red linen.” Either way, this text may be a reference to the amulet of birth that opened the uterus in the physical world, but paved the way to rebirth for the deceased in the afterlife. The amulet may be made out of red linen, or the red linen could refer to the garment of the Great One, which may be red (like the blood stained garments of Sekhmet after slaughter) from the blood stained linen of birth.

²⁹ R. Ritner, “A Uterine Amulet in the Oriental Institute Collection,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 43.3 (1984): 209-211.

³⁰ Book of the Dead, Chapter 71, a spell for going out in the day. Translation from R. O. Faulkner et al., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 108.

Egyptian women could have had prolonged labors due to a variety of different factors. In some cases labor can be prolonged because uterine contractions are insufficient to drive labor forward. In other cases labor can be prolonged because the fetus presents in an abnormal position that is not conducive to easy birth. In ideal cases, the fetus enters the birth canal with the back of its head anteriorly, towards the front of the woman's pelvis. If the fetal head presents posteriorly, with the back of the head towards the mother's back, labor can be prolonged. In other cases of abnormal presentation, the position of the fetus may have serious, and sometimes fatal, consequences. A breech presentation, where the feet or buttocks of the fetus come first may result in a situation where the fetal head is trapped and cannot make it through the birth canal. If the fetus is resting sideways in the uterus, delivery is impossible. Modern women who have access to prenatal care and ultrasound monitoring are notified of these difficult fetal presentations prior to delivery and, in most cases, their babies are delivered through planned caesarean sections. However, in the ancient world, and areas of the world without access to prenatal care and monitoring, these poor presentations can result in painful slow deliveries that can end in both fetal and maternal death.³¹

In addition to issues of abnormal fetal presentation, early studies on mummies have shown that in ancient Egypt, some women had very narrow

³¹ Summary of obstructed labor and abnormal fetal presentation with the help of Dr. Lewis Wall, personal communication.

pelves, similar to the pelves of men.³² If a woman's pelvis is too small for the fetus to move through the birth canal, a condition referred to as cephalo-pelvic disproportion, labor can be prolonged for several days. If the fit between the fetal head and the maternal pelvis is tight, labor may be prolonged but can still have a happy outcome. In cases of absolute disproportion, where the fetus's head is larger than the pelvic opening, the child will not be able to pass. In these extreme cases, the outcome is often catastrophic, ending with the death of the child and frequently with the death of the mother. Survival of the mother in these cases is dependant of the death of the fetus, maceration of the fetal body to where it can slide past the obstruction in the pelvis, and its delivery as a stillbirth. Women who endure prolonged labors often suffer terrible pelvic injuries, as the soft tissues of the bladder, vagina, cervix, and rectum can be crushed against the pelvic bones by the pressure of the fetal head for several days.³³

While there is not a great deal of data on women's pelves from the dynastic period,³⁴ it has been shown, in some cases, that pelvic abnormalities may have hindered births. D.E. Derry and Joyce Filer, who both studied Nubian remains, found pelvic abnormalities in Nubian women that would have interfered

³² D. E. Derry, *Archaeological Survey of Nubia, Bulletin 3*, (Cairo: National Printing Department, 1909), 49.

³³ Discussion of cephalo-pelvic disproportion and resulting condition and outcomes for mother and baby from Dr. Lewis Wall, personal conversation.

³⁴ Though it is outside the scope of this study, a more detailed study on pelvic measurements from dynastic remains could reveal trends in the pelvic sizes of men and women and could reveal how common small female pelves were and/or possible birth issues related to pelvic size.

with successful childbirth.³⁵ Notably, in the remains of one woman, a fetus was found still wedged in her pelvis.³⁶

Derry also surveyed dynastic remains from female priestesses of Hathor buried at Montuhotep II's funerary complex at Deir el Bahri. Derry again suggested that these women, also likely of Nubian origin, had abnormally narrow pelves.³⁷ In a study fraught with racist bias, Derry suggested that the women's remains, including their pelves and vertebrae, and possibly their gait, were more similar to apes than humans. He postulated this was due to the fact that these women were from one of the "lower racial groups."³⁸ Though the analysis of the remains suffers from his bias, if Derry's measurements can be trusted, three of the five women did display narrow pelves that could have caused difficult labors.³⁹

Henhenit, one of the female mummies with a very narrow pelvis, clearly suffered an exceptionally painful labor and tissue-damaging childbirth. Derry found that Henhenit suffered a vesicovaginal fistula, which is a crush injury to the

³⁵ J. Filer, "Mother and Baby Burials," 399 and D. E. Derry, *Archaeological Survey of Nubia, Bulletin 3*, 48-49.

³⁶ D. E. Derry, *Archaeological Survey of Nubia, Bulletin 3*, 48-49. Though this woman was identified as living in the Coptic period in Nubia, the issues with women's pelves were seen in earlier studies by Derry in Pharaonic Egypt in D. Derry, "Note on Five Pelves of Women of the Eleventh Dynasty in Egypt," 490-495.

³⁷ D. E. Derry, *ibid.* In his study, Derry showed that the women's antero-posterior measurement (from the spine to the front of the pelvis) was abnormally long. Combined with the fact that the transverse diameter of the women's pelves (measurement across the pelvic cavity) was abnormally narrow; these women would have had a great deal of difficulty passing fetuses through their pelves.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 495.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 492.

vaginal wall and bladder that allows the bladder to drain directly into the vagina.⁴⁰ Obstetric fistulas like this occur in instances of protracted labor where the fetus puts such pressure on the vaginal wall that tissue dies and holes occur in the vaginal wall and into the bladder or rectum. Henhenit's remains show evidence of a large hole between the bladder and the vagina, one which Derry noted he could pass an instrument through.⁴¹ It seem that Henhenit died in her early to mid 20s, and if this internal damage did not immediately bring her death, it would have caused her great pain during her remaining days. Unfortunately, obstetric fistulas are still common today in areas with little available obstetric care,⁴² and we can assume that many ancient Egyptian women who suffered abnormally extended periods of labor would have been at risk for this type of birth trauma.

The mummy of Queen Mutnodjmet, wife of the New Kingdom pharaoh Horemheb, also shows evidence of long and painful labors. Examined by Eugen Strouhal in the 1980s, Strouhal postulated that Mutnodjmet was somewhere between the ages of 30-45 when she died. Her pelvis was asymmetrical, with the right side being both lower and thinner than the left side. Additionally, the lower side of her pelvis showed evidence of erosion and pitting. Strouhal attributed the

⁴⁰ Vesicovaginal fistulas cause a constant stream of urine to leak from the bladder into the vagina. This situation causes painful and debilitating ulcers on the vagina and legs and the constant drainage of waste material produces an unfortunate and unmanageable smell.

⁴¹ D. E. Derry, "Note on Five Pelves of Women of the Eleventh Dynasty in Egypt," 492.

⁴² Obstetric fistulas (tears in vagina to the bladder or rectum) occur in 50,000-100,000 women each year, mainly in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. With limited medical assistance, over two million women live with this painful and socially stigmatizing condition. World Health Organization, "10 Facts on Obstetric Fistula," http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/obstetric_fistula/en/ (Accessed April 12, 2012).

deformities, in part, to difficult deliveries and excessive blood loss, likely occurring during or after attempts at childbirth.⁴³ Known to have no living children with Horemheb, Mutnodjmet likely died trying to provide the king with an heir. Sadly, amongst Mutnodjmet's remains were the bones of a fetus that was roughly 265 days in age – close to, or at, full-term.⁴⁴ Based on her pelvic abnormalities and possible health issues, it possible that neither Mutnodjmet nor her child were able to survive labor and delivery. If either did survive the birth, their shared burial suggests that they died shortly afterward.

With many labors being delayed due to fetal position and/or maternal physiology,⁴⁵ it is not surprising that the Egyptians would have believed that the deceased could also experience a stunted journey through the Duat. Understanding the importance of birth occurring in a timely manner, it is not surprising that the “loosening” of the sun god, and the deceased by association, would have been a part of funerary culture, one that most likely reflected the real world reality of protracted births that resulted in fetal and maternal death.

“On His Mother’s Leg”

If a child was able to successfully traverse the birth canal and pass into the world through the vaginal canal, it would emerge from its mother’s vaginal opening. The emergence of the fetal head, which in modern obstetric literature is

⁴³ E. Strouhal, “Queen Mutnodjmet at Memphis”, 320-321.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 321.

⁴⁵ It is of note that today it is estimated that obstructed labor occurs in roughly 5% of births, and accounts for 8% of maternal death worldwide. World Health Organization, “10 Facts on Obstetric Fistula,” http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/obstetric_fistula/en/ (Accessed April 12, 2012).

called “crowning” is not described in the records of ancient Egyptian daily life. However, the moment is frequently described and referenced in funerary literature. When the birth of Re, Horus, or the deceased was envisioned as occurring through the body of Nut, like a child from the womb to the vaginal canal, the child of the Duat had to successfully pass through the vagina of his mother Nut to be reborn. In depictions of Nut’s body as the sky, Re clearly moves through her and is born from her vagina, appearing as a newly born sun upon her thighs.⁴⁶ In a wide variety of funerary texts, this moment of birth can be referred to as both a physical birth through Nut’s vagina, and also more metaphorically as the passing through a door or gate. These descriptions, both literal and metaphoric, shed light on both the Egyptian conception of birth and the language used to describe it.

In the very first utterance of the Pyramid Texts, Nut states that the king is the one who “split open” her “womb,” referring to his birth like that of the sun each morning, which also parted her womb and came out through her vagina.⁴⁷ This text refers directly to the opening of the cervix during childbirth. Other funerary texts, while not always discussing the passing of the sun or deceased through the womb or vagina, instead use the euphemism “parting the thighs” to refer to the moment of birth. In Pyramid Text 248, the king is described as one

⁴⁶ See the Nut ceiling of Ramesses VI, published by A. Piankoff, in *The Tomb of Ramesses VI*, 149-159.

⁴⁷ Translation of Pyramid Text 1, a recitation by Nut from a sarcophagus text, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 1.

who “has emerged from the Ennead’s thighs,”⁴⁸ and in Pyramid Text 517, he must swim to the physical world, which is noted as a place “which is between Nut’s thighs.”⁴⁹ The use of the euphemism continues in the Coffin Texts, and spell 402, Khopri is one “who came into being of himself upon his mother’s lap.”⁵⁰ Faulkner notes that the literal translation of this last word is actually not on the lap, but “leg,”⁵¹ showing that the fetus, and by association the deceased, not only parts the legs of his mother as he is born, but literally slides out on her legs.

A few texts have even more information linking the moment of rebirth to physical birth. In Coffin Text 84, as we have seen, the deceased notes that his mother is pregnant and stabs at him. Shortly after he is born upon her thighs:

I have presented offerings before Isis and Nephthys, that they may place holy things upon the arms of Sheshat who is pregnant with me and holds back from me. She is angry with me and stabs (*sšd*) at me. I have made the front(?)⁵² which is between her thighs as Him whose head is raised I have issued from between the thighs of Isis as Horus.⁵³

⁴⁸ Translation of Pyramid Text 248, a spell for becoming a star, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 42.

⁴⁹ Translation of Pyramid Text 517, a ferryman text, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 159.

⁵⁰ Translation of Coffin Text 402, a spell providing magic, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts II*, 46.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Faulkner suggests that “making the front” may refer to the outward look of pregnancy, i.e. a pregnant belly. However, it is likely that here the actual birth of out the vagina is what the deceased is making his way through – “the front which is between her thighs.” See R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, 88-89.

⁵³ Translation of Coffin Text 84, a spell for becoming Nehebkhu in the realm of the dead, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, 88-89.

In this text, the deceased, likened to Horus, issues between his mother's legs as "Him whose head is raised." Because this spell is for becoming a serpent deity, Faulkner suggested that this is a reference to a mythological snake.⁵⁴ However, in an ideal birth, where the infant's head presents anteriorly, the mechanics of labor force the infant's head to extend as it begins to crown.⁵⁵ Additionally, a healthy neonate has a decent amount of neck control so that it can raise its head for nursing and breathing.⁵⁶ It is possible here that the deceased's "raised" head likens both his rebirth and his body to that of a newborn child who goes through an optimal delivery and is delivered in a healthy state.

In another illustrative rebirth spell from the Coffin Texts, the deceased likens himself to Horus and describes the moment of his rebirth:

I am indeed the Great Seed. I have passed between her thighs [in] this [my name] of Jackal of the Sunshine. I have broken out of the egg, I have floated(?) on its white (?), I have glided on its yolk (?) I am the Lord of blood.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid., note no. 7.

⁵⁵ The extension of the child's head as it crowns is involuntary and due to the mechanics of human labor. As Dr. Lewis Wall notes, "During normal labor the fetal head is forced against the chest, flexing the head as it descends through the midpelvis and undergoing rotational descent. As the head exits the pelvis the force of the uterine contractions cause the head to extend as it begins to crown and after delivery it rotates externally prior to expulsion." Personal communication with Dr. Lewis Wall.

⁵⁶ When a child is born with excessively weak muscles, which is clinically referred to as hypotonia, or "floppy baby syndrome," this is generally indicative of more serious congenital defect in the infant or the result of some type of birth trauma. These infants can have difficulty nursing and breathing, and in ancient Egypt, they likely would not have thrived. Thus, one can understand why a neonate with strong muscles and good head control would be desired. For more on neonatal hypotonia see A. Hill, "Neonatal Hypotonia," in *Current Management in Child Neurology*, ed. B. Maria (London: BC Decker, 2005), 528-534.

⁵⁷ Translation of Coffin Text 334, a spell of rebirth, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts II*, 258.

In this text, the deceased's journey to rebirth is expressed through the body of his mother using the metaphor of a broken egg. He equates his expulsion from the uterus as breaking out from the egg, floating on the waters of birth, which are likened to the "white" and "yolk" of the broken egg. He also describes himself as the "Lord of Blood," which is likely a reference to being master of the blood that would have emerged during his birth.

"The Door of Hathor Has Been Infringed"

Though some references to birth are literal, or simply veiled in euphemism, the passage through the body of Nut can also be referred to more metaphorically. These instances that refer to the passage through Nut in a more symbolic way can also shed light on Egyptian conceptions of labor and birth. The metaphoric passage of the deceased through the body of the sky, or other mother goddesses, treats the mother as "house," with a gates or doors that must be opened for rebirth.

In Pyramid Text 374, we see the king's birth occurring through a door in the sky:

The sky's door has been opened to you, that you may emerge from it as Horus, as the jackal at this side, whose form has surpassed (that of) [his] opponents, [for] you have no human father who can give you birth, you have no human mother who can give you birth.⁵⁸

Just as when "the door of Hathor has been infringed,"⁵⁹ this emergence from the door happened just before rebirth. Similarly, in the Book of the Dead, "the holy

⁵⁸ Translation of Pyramid Text 374, a spell to allow the king to be reborn, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 84.

⁵⁹ Book of the Dead, Chapter 39, a spell for repelling a Rerek-snake in the God's Domain, from R. O. Faulkner et al., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 104.

gate”⁶⁰ or “the great gate of the sky”⁶¹ is where spirits are reborn. Therefore, to be reborn, the deceased can be likened to Re or Horus, reaching the gate of the sky: “I have come like Horus into the place of the horizon of the sky; I announce Re at the gates of the horizon, the gods are joyful at meeting me, and the costly stones of the gods are on me.”⁶²

Moving from darkness to day,⁶³ Re had to pass through a final gate, which was, in at least one version of the Duat, through his mother Nut’s vagina. The most telling of these texts, Coffin Text 1132, which we have already seen in part, notes that Re, or the deceased, is bound prior to this and can only be released by the waters of Nun:

A gate with fire in front and hidden at the back, with a man in it who is bound, and it is a marvel for the length of the day (?).” I am Nu, Lord of darkness; I have come that I may have power over the path, and he who has two faces is afraid of me.”⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Book of the Dead, Chapter 17, a spell for going in and out of the god’s domain, translation from *ibid.*, plate 8.

⁶¹ Book of the Dead, Chapter 174, a spell enabling a spirit to go out from the great gate of the sky, translation from *ibid.*, 130.

⁶² Book of the Dead, Chapter 144, a spell for knowing the names of the gatekeepers, translation from *ibid.*, 120.

⁶³ It is not impossible that the concept of passing multiple gates, or other underworld threats, may have had some connection to the struggle of the fetus to be born. The further investigation of the discourse between the deceased and the gatekeepers in the Book of Two Ways and in the later underworld books of the New Kingdom may present more links to real world birth beliefs and ideas.

⁶⁴ Translation of Coffin Text 1132, a spell for having power over the path, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts III*, 170.

Here again the sun god may be like a child in the womb. He is bound for the length of a day. i.e. 12 hours, by a gate with fire in the front and darkness in the back, and only by the help of the waters of Nun can he be released.

This text may refer more literally to the birth of the god than one might imagine. As we have seen, the Egyptian child had to be unbound from the womb to travel the waters of birth towards the vaginal opening, which was commonly referred to as a “gate.”⁶⁵ In this case, the god is bound for “the length of a day,” the time it takes to get through the underworld, and also the average time of natural labor and childbirth. It is also of note that the bound one faces a burning “gate” with darkness behind it. When the child moved into the vaginal canal, with the darkness of the womb behind it, it would have had to pass the last gateway to the world, the vaginal opening. Interestingly, the point where a child’s head crowns, or forces its way out of the vaginal opening, is met with an intense burning sensation for the mother, not unlike the tissue being on fire. The sensation is so strong that this point in natural childbirth is described in English as “the ring of fire.” It would not be surprising for this sensation not only to be known, but to have been described through metaphor as a “burning gate,” since the vagina was so often referred to as a gate.

Additionally in spell 95 from the Coffin Texts, there is an episode that describes the “Gate Keeper” as one who “inflames wombs” “in the presence of Him who goes forth from his burning,” an episode that also may refer to the flaming of the vagina and the crowning of the child, or “Him who goes forth from

⁶⁵ Both in the texts in this chapter, as well as in New Kingdom love poetry, the imagery of a gate, or door, is used to describe the vagina.

his burning.”⁶⁶ The nature of fire and the “flames” of the sun may well account for these burning gates and references to the sun as one who burns. However, it is also possible that the common use of the vagina as a “gate” and the flaming sensation felt by the woman when pushing out the child may have led to language and birth metaphor that made its way into the funerary texts in episodes of rebirth.

“The Waters of Life in the Sky Have Come”

When the child comes forth at the moment on birth, it is with a flood of amniotic fluid and blood. This part of birth is not mentioned in texts or representations from the physical world. Fortunately, in many cases in funerary literature, the moment of the birth of the sun is, again, discussed in terms of a physical birth from his mother Nut. Both in metaphor and in more literal examples, these funerary texts offer information about the way this part of the birthing process was understood and handled.

In funerary texts, we find that once Nut’s water breaks, linen was prepared to receive the sun for his morning appearance from Nut’s body. In Pyramid Text 249 the king declares that the sun’s birth linens, which are guarded by two uraeus snakes, await him: “Unis is the one to whom belongs⁶⁷ the linen that the uraei guard during the night of the great flood that comes from the great

⁶⁶ Translation of Coffin Text 95, a spell for going into the day, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, 94.

⁶⁷ It is of note that Allen’s translation of Pyramid Text 249, seen here, differs from that of Faulkner where the king states “I on my way” to the linen. See R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 61 for this alternate translation. Whether claiming the linen or moving towards it on his path to birth, the utterance clearly references the fact that linen was prepared for the very real birth of the sun, and the king, therefore, will be privy to the linen and will be received like the sun.

goddess.”⁶⁸ We also see a reference to the linens of birth in Coffin Texts, when the deceased notes that he is one who has come to assist those who assist the birth of the sun: “I have come to you that I may nourish your great ones [...] the keeper of linen for the uraei on the night of the great flood which issued from the Great Lady.”⁶⁹ Also in the Book of the Dead, the deceased takes on the role of protector of the sun’s birth linen: “I am he who guards the linen garments which the Cobra guarded on the night of the great flood.”⁷⁰ Whether as the sun, or helping to prepare for the birth of the sun, these texts all show that birth linens were prepared for the very literal birth of the sun. And, it is very likely that this preparation and guarding of birth linens for the sun was rooted in a real world practice prior to the birth of the newborn child.

With linen ready, at the moment of birth a rush of fluid and blood would have issued forth from the mother. Nut’s birth of the sun is no exception to this real world birthing process. In Pyramid Text 685 we see direct reference to the rushing of fluid and the arrival of the child. In this text, the waters of life in the sky and earth come forth, the sky flaming and the earth shaking, Pepi appears through the legs of Nut like the sun on the horizon:

“The waters of life in the sky have come, the waters of life in the earth have come. The sky has flamed for you, the earth has shaken for you,

⁶⁸ Pyramid Text 249, a spell of rebirth, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 42.

⁶⁹ Translation of Coffin Text 971, a spell of protection, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts III*, 93.

⁷⁰ Translation of the Book of the Dead Chapter 174, a spell enabling a spirit to go out from the great gate of the sky, from R. O. Faulkner et al., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 130.

before the god's birth." The two mountains have been parted: the god has come into being, the god has taken control of his body. The two mountains have been parted: this Pepi Neferkare has come into being, this Pepi Neferkare has taken control of his body. Look, this Pepi Neferkare, his feet shall be kissed by the clean waters that exist with Atum, that Shu's penis made and Tefnut's vulva brought into being.⁷¹

Here, we see that the king's birth, like the sun's, comes when he parts the legs, or "mountains of the horizon," of his mother, the sky. Before this moment, however, he is ferried on the waters of life, which come from both the sky and the earth. Interestingly, here again we see the waters of Nun being associated with the amniotic fluid, which, the last part of the utterance tells us, exist with Atum, but come from Shu's penis, brought into being by Tefnut's vagina. Thus, the fluid of birth came from both the female sky and male earth. Again we see the flaming before the birth of the king. Possibly a reference to redness on the horizon before the sun comes up, this could also again be a reference to the literal flaming of Nut's vagina before the king comes to join the sun on the horizon.

References to the blood of Nut and the redness of the sky with the birth of the sun are also common. When the sun rose on the horizon each morning, it was preceded by a red tinge in the sky, and this redness was associated with the blood of birth that comes with Re's arrival. This occurrence is noted in the funerary texts in a variety of ways, some metaphoric and some more literal. Pyramid Text 504 uses the metaphor of wine to refer to the redness in the sky, stating that when Nut gives birth to the dawn, the sky has "become pregnant with

⁷¹ Pyramid Text 685, a spell of rebirth, translation from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 291.

wine.”⁷² Also using the metaphor of the sky as a house, one filled with red, Coffin Text 1145 refers to the sun as “the god, the lord of the Red Mansion which is in the horizon.”⁷³

In the New Kingdom royal astronomical ceiling texts, the sun is said to swim in “his redness” when he rises:

[štꜣ] is the place of rising which Re’ makes.
He opens his <ball of clay>. He swims in his redness.
He opens when he sets. He swims
[It opens to] the sky. It opens to the sky – that is to say, the place in which Re’ rises upwards from the Duat, that from which he rises daily.⁷⁴

In his form as Khepri, the morning sun, Re opens up the sky swimming in redness, the morning sky tinged with the blood of his birth. If there was any question that this was a reference to a literal birth, the text goes on to say:

[He sits] on his [cloth]. He sits on his [cloth], that is to say, on his birth-brick – that is to say, he is accustomed to do it.he...in the form of Kheprer, and he assumes the form of the sun-disk, which [is spoken of], the one which is in the picture. It is this water of ...that he makes....., if it is in the water that is customarily sat <upon>.⁷⁵

Referencing the birth brick and cloths of birth, as well as the waters that bring him forth, or those that clean him, the text clearly refers to the sun’s birth as a

⁷² Translation of Pyramid Text 504, a purification text, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 334.

⁷³ Translation of Coffin Text 1145, a spell of protection, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts III*, 178.

⁷⁴ Publication and translation of New Kingdom astronomical texts (reconstructed here from Papyrus Carlsberg I and the ceilings of Seti I and Ramesses IV) from O. Neugebauer and R. Parker. *Egyptian Astronomical Texts I: The Early Decons* (London: Brown University Press, 1960), 48-49, plate 44.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

literal birth from his mother the sky. The text that follows this one continues with the imagery of real birth stating, “The redness <comes> after his birth.”⁷⁶

Further references to the blood of birth stress the relationship between real world birth and rebirth. In Coffin Text 1145 the deceased states “I am the justified one who follows the Bloody-one.”⁷⁷ Here, the deceased follows the sun in his rebirth, where he is referred to like a newborn child, as “the Bloody-one.” Most explicit, in the Pyramid Texts, the king says just after the rising of the sun: “I am the redness which came forth from Isis, I am the blood that issued from Nephthys,”⁷⁸ or in Allen’s translation “Pepi is the red linen that came from Isis and the redness that came from Nephthys.”⁷⁹ The sun god, and the king with him, is referred to directly as the blood that issues forth from the goddesses Isis and Nephthys.

In the funerary texts it is clear that linens of birth, those that the cobras, or the deceased guard before the birth of the sun, are put to use to clean the newborn sun. After the cleaning, these blood stained red linens were a symbol of the sun’s successful birth. The festival of “red linen” appears in funerary texts after the sun is born.⁸⁰ And, interestingly, an official Festival of Red Linen exists

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Translation of Coffin Text 1145, a spell of protection, from L. Lesko, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of Two Ways*, 37-38.

⁷⁸ Translation of Pyramid Text 570, a spell for joining the sun, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 225.

⁷⁹ Translation of Pyramid Text 570, a spell for joining the sun, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 179.

⁸⁰ References to the festival of red linen occur in Pyramid Text 250, Coffin Text 890, and The Book of the Dead, Chapters 17 and 174.

in temple records.⁸¹ This may point to a celebration for the newly born god that occurred within the temple. And, it is possible that this celebration may reflect a real birth ceremony that centered on birth linens and was celebrated after the successful birth of a child.

The child in the womb faced a treacherous journey. From the time the waters of birth began to drain around him, he had to traverse the belly of his mother, avoid the threat of his umbilical cord, and not succumb to binding in the womb. The moment of his birth was a triumph, and once he exited the vagina he could look forward to being received and attended to by his mother's birth attendants. If his mother was as lucky, she, too, survived her labor without major internal or external injuries. With some of the danger behind them, mother and child would have received further attention and protection.

⁸¹ The festival of red linen is attested at the Roman temple of Esna in both areas L4 and L20. For publication of the relief text, see A. Grimm, *Altägyptischen Festkalender in den Tempeln der griechisch-römischen Epoche* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994), 241 and 245.

Chapter 8 “I Fan Air at Your Nostrils:” The Moments After Birth

Look on me, the son of Isis; I was conceived in Pe and born in Chemmis; I was nursed in the Field of Fire on the day when I was received (?) on the birth-stool, I was taken to my father Atum and he gave me the ornaments of his father Gēb; I entered the horizon.¹

Once Horus made it through the body of his mother, he was received on the arms of his divine family members. With air in his lungs -- body cleansed, umbilical cord cut, and life given to his limbs -- he was ready to be nurtured by his mother Isis. Both were lucky to have survived the ordeal, and they both needed further protection to make it through the days that followed. Though Horus was without a father to raise him, in Osiris's place, the gods received Horus and helped Isis protect him during his infancy. He was fortunate to survive his childhood and be able to avenge his father, restoring order in the physical realm.

Mortal children who survived the trip from the womb through the bodies of their mothers, like Horus, were born on the arms of their family members and, possibly, in some cases, medical practitioners. With air in their lungs and their bodies cleaned, their umbilical cords were cut and the children received their fate and name. If necessary, both child and mother would have received attention to deal with any medical issues, and both would likely have received some type of magical protection to ensure their safety in the dangerous postpartum period that had just begun. Finally, children were presented to their fathers or other family members and began their journey toward adulthood.

¹ Coffin Text 286, a spell for becoming a falcon, translation from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, 214.

“The Child Slid Into Her Arms”

In ideal cases, women did not receive their children alone; the same attendants that helped them bring forth their children would have also likely have been the first to give care to the newborn. Unfortunately, there is little information on the reception of the child from the physical world. Aside from the episode in Papyrus Westcar where each child “slid into” the arms of Isis after she coaxed them out by their names,² there is no direct reference to the reception of the newly born child.

Though uncommon in texts from daily life, again in funerary literature we find evidence for the reception of the child. Often depicted as literal arms in the New Kingdom tombs of the pharaohs, and mentioned, as early as the Pyramid Texts the sun, and the deceased by association, is born onto the arms of the gods. We find in Pyramid Text 570, just as Nut births the king, he is received by Shu and Tefnut: “The god has been given birth by the sky on the arms of Shu and Tefnut.”³ Additionally, the king is noted as leaning on the arms of Shu once his is born in Pyramid Text 565: “This Pepi has leaned on your arms, Shu, like the Sun’s learning on your arms.”⁴

In another example, we see the sun, and the king with him, are received by two birth attendants. Pyramid Text 565 states that when the king is born with

² Papyrus Westcar, M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 220-221.

³ Translation of Pyramid Text 570, a spell for joining the sun, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 177.

⁴ Translation of Pyramid Text 565, an ascension spell, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 175.

the sun he makes the third person of the two that are there to receive him: "This Pepi has appeared with the Sun in his appearance, the third of them who are with them: one behind this Pepi, one before; one placing water, one placing sand."⁵ This text tells us not only that there are the traditional two attendants for the birth -- one behind, and one in front -- but it also may make reference to a practice of delivering water over the woman and placing sand on the ground below her during her time of bearing.

Egyptian women likely gave birth in their homes and their floors were, in most cases, dirt or sand. It is likely that a hole would have been dug in the floors over which the parturient woman could squat while she delivered. Possibly held over the space by an attendant and/or birth bricks,⁶ this cleared out space would have allowed the attendant receiving the child better access to the woman and coming child. Additionally, the hole would also have acted as receptacle for the fluids of birth when they rushed forth. It is also likely that water would have been applied to the woman's vaginal area during the birth to both soothe the area and to keep it clean. Since water and birth fluids would both be falling into the hole, it

⁵ Translation of Pyramid Text 565, an ascension spell, from J. Allen and P. Der Manuelian, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 175.

⁶ Although only one birth brick, that of Reniseneb, has been recovered from ancient Egypt (J. Wegner "A Decorated Birth-Brick from South Abydos," 447-496), we can assume that when available, women gave birth on bricks or a birth chair. We have already seen reference to the bricks on the Stela of Neferabu, where the man states that he suffered like "a woman on the bricks," suggesting that this was a common way women labored. As A. M. Roth and C. Roehrig have shown, birth bricks were mentioned as early as the Old Kingdom and they were used not only to support the mother during birth, but also as a place to place the infant and cut the umbilical cord. For more on birth bricks, as well as their relationship and appropriation into the material culture of rebirth, see A. M. Roth and C. Roehrig, "Magical Bricks and the Bricks of Birth," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 88 (2002): 121-139.

would make sense that sand would be used to absorb these fluids, keeping the area dryer and cleaner.

It is possible that this practice of adding sand to the area under the birthing woman was meant not just to keep the area clean and dry, but also to purify the area and detract malevolent sprits that would have been attracted by the blood of birth. In a spell praising the rising of Re in the east, from the Book of the Dead, we see that the deceased has his limbs knit together and protected by Hapy. Afterwards, protection is granted to the deceased to facilitate his rebirth.

The text reads:

I am your protection of this fire, I drive him away from the valley, I drive it, namely the sand from your two feet. For I am the one who drags that sand in order to stop up the hidden place. I ward off the arm of the one who would oppose himself against the flame of the desert. I have set fire to the desert, I have deflected the path, for I am the protection.⁷

In this case, not only is sand dragged to protect the hidden place, the place of rebirth, but fire is created elsewhere to deflect the attention of those that would harm the deceased's rebirth. Since the next element of the spell contains actions by Isis to provide air and clear the windpipe of the newly reborn, these prior actions with sand and flame that are carried out for the newly reborn may be rooted in real world birth practices. If so, it may support the suggestion that in the physical world sand was used to both purify and protect the area of birth.⁸ This

⁷ The Book of the Dead, Chapter 151, a spell of protection. Translation from R. O. Faulkner et al., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, plate 33.

⁸ It is unknown what would have happened to the sand and/or the area after the birth. It is likely that the area was covered with clean sand and ritually cleaned, though it is unknown if the sand with blood and fluid was carried out of the birthing area or if it was covered over.

text may further suggest that if a ritual with fire was carried out to detract harmful entities from being attracted to rebirth, a practice like this could have also existed for a birth.

“You Open Wide His Mouth”

After the child arrived on the arms of the ones who received him, the child’s airway may have been cleared. Because once outside the womb the child must breathe air, it is integral that the fluids that the child ingests during gestation and birth be removed to clear the way for the child’s breath. The Egyptians would have been intimately aware of how important it was for the child to begin to breathe immediately after emerging from the vagina, as those that were denied oxygen too long due to long periods in the birth canal or from ill-functioning lungs would not have easily survived.⁹

Little information on the first breath of the child and the clearing of the airway comes to us from the realm of daily life and literature. However, there is one section in the Hymn to the Aten that attributes the Aten with the ability to give breath to the newborn child when he comes forth. The Aten is the “Nurse in the womb, giver of breath, To nourish all that he made. When he comes from the womb to breathe, One the day of his birth, You open wide his mouth, You supply his needs.”¹⁰ This text is an explicit reference to the god opening the newborn’s

⁹ The lungs of the fetus are not fully developed until late in the third trimester. Due to this, preterm neonates can have great difficulty breathing. Dealt with in the developed world with mechanical breathing assistance, in the ancient world or today in areas with little access to neonatal medical care, these babies would have a hard time getting oxygen and many are not able to survive.

¹⁰ Translation of The Hymn the Aten from M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 98.

mouth and assisting with first breath; this action is also commonly depicted in temple scenes where the gods give the king breath and life symbolically via the *ankh* sign. With the first breath such a central part of neonatal survival, it seems possible and likely that the gods would have been attributed with the ability to give breath to children, just as they did to kings.

In the funerary realm, a variety of gods and goddesses can assist the deceased with taking his first breath after rebirth. In Chapter 151 of the Book of the Dead, Isis is sent to protect the newly reborn and assist him in breathing, just as she assisted Horus after his birth. Isis says to the deceased:

I have come that I may be your protection. I fan air at your nostrils for you, I fan the north wind which comes forth from Atum for your nose. I clear your windpipe for you. I cause you to be a god with your enemies fallen under your sandals. May you be vindicated in the sky and may your flesh be powerful among the gods.¹¹

Isis fans air to make sure that pleasant and life-giving north wind, here associated with the creator-god Atum, comes to the newly reborn. She, acting as mother, makes sure the efflux of fluids that came with rebirth did not cause harm, and clears the windpipe so sweet air can enter the lungs of the one who has just achieved rebirth. We see further evidence of the importance of breath for the deceased in the Book of the Dead, Chapter 71, when the deceased asks: “May I rise to be a likeness of myself, may breath be at my nose, may my eyes see in the company with those who are in the horizon on that day of dooming the robber.” Referencing the triumph of Horus in birth, and the initial failure of Seth to

¹¹ Translation of Book of the Dead, Chapter 151, from R. O. Faulkner et al., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, plate 33.

prevent his birth, the deceased makes sure, that he, like Horus, will have breath at his nose.

Interestingly, it is not just through spells that the deceased was enabled to breathe in the afterlife. As A. M. Roth has shown, both the *ntrwj* blades and the *psš-kf* implements that were part of funerary ritual evolved from the realm of birth.¹² Roth suggests that the *ntrwj* blades were actually modeled after the fingers that the birth attendant would have put into the mouth of the child to both clear the airway and also to check for palate abnormalities, which could cause issues for nursing.¹³ Additionally, she argues that while the original purpose of the opening of the *psš-kf* was to cut the umbilical cord, over time it was associated with a birth ritual connected to the strengthening of the mouth of the child, which ensured nursing, and thus became a ritual performed on the mummy to make sure that he could receive nourishment in the afterlife.¹⁴

“They Washed Him, Having Cut His Navel Cord”

Once the child was breathing well, his navel cord would have been cut and his body would have been cleaned.¹⁵ As we see in Papyrus Westcar, the

¹² See A. M. Roth, “Fingers, Stars, and the ‘Opening of the Mouth’: The Nature and Function of the *ntrwj*-Blades,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 79 (1993): 57-79 and “The *psš-kf* and the ‘Opening of the Mouth’ Ceremony: A Ritual of Rebirth,” 113-147.

¹³ A. M. Roth, “Fingers, Stars, and the ‘Opening of the Mouth,’” 63-64.

¹⁴ A. M. Roth, “The *psš-kf* and the ‘Opening of the Mouth’ Ceremony,” 123-124. Though this analysis makes a big jump between idea and practice, if Roth’s hypothesis is correct, this again shows the transmission of birth culture into rebirth practices, as well as the importance of the further investigation of funerary practice to illuminate rituals of birth.

¹⁵ Because the umbilical cord continues to bring oxygenated blood to the child from the placenta, it is possible that the Egyptians would not have cut the cord until the

divine attendants took each child and “washed him, having cut his navel cord, and laid him on a pillow of cloth,”¹⁶ and this was likely the common process for healthy children. Because the placenta was afforded such an important place in the child’s birth, regarded as the child’s link to his mother, it was likely that this process of cutting the umbilical cord was ritualized, though it is difficult to know how exactly.¹⁷

In the funerary texts, we find reference to the necessary action of the cutting of Horus’s umbilical cord. Interestingly, Isis is the one who is recorded as having cut her son’s umbilical cord after his birth. Spell 474 from the Coffin Texts tells us that the deceased knows the names of a variety of important items, one of which is a knife that is “the cutter of Isis with which she cut the navel-string of Horus.”¹⁸ In spell 480 the name of a knife is said to be “the fingernail of Isis, the cutter of Isis <with which> she cut the navel-string of Horus the young child.”¹⁹

saw that the fetus was breathing well enough to be receiving oxygen in its lungs. It is also unknown if they tied off the cord before cutting it. Tying the cord prior to severing it from the placenta is very important, as cutting an non-knotted cord exposes the neonatal circulatory system and can result in hemorrhage and death.

¹⁶ Translation of Papyrus Westcar from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 220.

¹⁷ A. M. Roth suggests that the child was shown the knife that severed his cord before it was cut to show that the link between mother and child was broken. She believes that this would have “informed” the baby that it was time to nourish himself and he would begin to breathe and nurse on his own. She also suggests that this act was further ritualized and became a practice to give rigidity to the jaw for nursing in newly born infants. A. M. Roth, “The *psš-ḳf* and the ‘Opening of the Mouth’ Ceremony,” 124.

¹⁸ Translation of Coffin Text 474, a spell of the net, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts II*, 112.

¹⁹ Translation of Coffin Text 480, a spell of the net, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts II*, 125.

While it is not mentioned in other texts, it seems that in the case of Horus's birth, Isis, not the birth attendants, was the one who cut the umbilical cord of her own child. It is unknown if this was a normal practice in the physical realm, it is possible that there was ritual importance to the mother severing the cord between herself and the child. Certainly if the mother did cut the cord, we can assume she was aided by her birth attendants.

It seems clear that the actual knife used to cut the cord was the *psš-ḳf*. Made out of flint with a divided fishtail form blade, these sharp serrated, concave knives would be perfect for holding down and severing the thick and unwieldy cord.²⁰ As A. M. Roth has shown, the ritual *psš-ḳfs* from the funerary realm could bear red ochre, a symbol of their original use to sever the umbilical cord of the child.²¹ Additionally, Roth has suggested that the shape of the *psš-ḳf*, in its most curved and ornate form, bears the shape of the bicornate cow uterus²² that, as we have seen, was used to represent the human uterus and was a common symbol on birth related items. Likely not coincidental, Meskhenet, the goddess of the birth brick, wears the bovine uterus, and possibly, in its symbolic uterine form, the *psš-ḳf*, on her head.

After the cord was cut, it seems that the next step would have been to clean the child. As we have seen in Papyrus Westcar, each child was cleaned and then put on a pillow of cloth. It may be possible that Coffin Text 6 refers to

²⁰ A. M. Roth, "The *psš-ḳf* and the 'Opening of the Mouth' Ceremony," 123.

²¹ Ibid., 124.

²² Ibid., 129.

this cleaning when it says that after “Isis squats (?) by you, she makes you bright, she makes for you fair ways of vindication against your foes, male and female, etc., and those who would have judgment against you in the realm of the dead on this happy day.”²³ Thus, on the “happy day” of birth, Isis delivers the child and makes him bright, likely from cleaning him, though this could also refer to a brightness that reflects the solar properties of the deceased. After the child was cleaned, he was likely put on a pillow or a birth brick covered in cloth.

“Khnum Gave Health to His Body”

Because fetal oxygen levels can be depleted for many reasons during birth, neonates can, and often are, born with their skin a gray, blue, or purple color. Knowing that the dead turned these dangerous colors, it is possible that care was taken to bring the pink color of life to their skin. Today, encouraging the circulation of oxygen to the fetus is accomplished by clearing the airway, cutting the umbilical cord, and massage. As we have seen, these first two acts were clearly completed when an Egyptian child was born. It seems likely that massage of the infant was also carried out shortly after birth. Papyrus Westcar seems to refer to this practice when it says that “Khnum gave health”²⁴ to each child’s body.

²³ Translation of Coffin Text 6, a spell of rebirth, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, 3.

²⁴ Translation of Papyrus Westcar from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 220-221.

“Anyone Born This Day Will Not Live”

Literature suggests that just after a child was born its fate would have been pronounced. For the average child this pronouncement of fate was likely done by a family member or by another birth attendant who had special skills or status. It is even possible that this person or persons took on the guise of Meskhenet²⁵ or the Hathors,²⁶ the goddesses who, in myth and literature, were in charge of announcing fate. In more elaborate births, it could have been possible that seven priestesses or musicians of Hathor would have come to announce the fate of the child.²⁷ Like the children in literature, fates could be positive or negative for the newly born. With the high rate of infant, child, and adult mortality, it is not surprising that fate tended to be more commonly proclaimed negative than positive.

²⁵ In Papyrus Westcar, when Meskhenet attends the birth to tell the destiny of the three triplets of Rudjedet, their fate is already clearly determined at their birth when she states each is “A king who will assume the kingship in this whole land.” Translation of Papyrus Westcar from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 220-221. In funerary literature, Meskhenet’s also fulfills this role when she attends to the fate of the deceased. Meskhenet can be seen in her form as an anthropomorphic birth brick over the head of the deceased during the “weighing of the heart” scene. For a representative example, see R. O. Faulkner et al., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, plate 3.

²⁶ The Seven Hathors were noted as attending the birth the newly born to tell the child’s fate. In both the case of the prince in *The Doomed Prince*, and the wife created for Bata in *The Tale of The Two Brothers*, the Seven Hathors come to determine the fate of the newly born, or created, individual. For these episodes in *The Doomed Prince* and *The Tale of the Two Brothers*, see M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, pages 200 and 207, respectively.

²⁷ The many birth attendants present in the New Kingdom divine birth scenes at the arrival of the divine child may be evidence of such a royal practice. For these scenes see H. Brunner, *Die Geburt des Gottkönigs*, 1964.

Created from the essence of the father and determined by the will of the gods, a child had a fate before it came to earth. This is made most clear in the statements of kings who stress their divine father's essence as the basis for their rule. Senwosret I, for example, notes that his divine father was one who "destined me to rule the people, made me to be before mankind. He fashioned me as a palace-dweller, and offspring not yet issued from the thighs."²⁸ This is similar for the common man, as The Maxims of Ptahhotep note, a man's son's fate is determined by the gods. In the case of a naughty son, for example: "His guilt was fated in the womb; He whom they guide cannot go wrong, Whom they make boatless cannot cross."²⁹

The Cairo Calendar shows us that when a child was born, the day of the birth itself could affect its future fate. Though it is unclear if this type of calendar had bearing on the pronouncements of the Hathors of Meskhenet, it is clear that people believed the day of birth was related to the fate of the child. Some days were particularly favorable, with the calendar stating, "Anyone born on this day will die at a good"³⁰ or "great"³¹ "old age." To receive this fate would have been a boon in a society where roughly 50% of the population did not make it past the

²⁸ Translation of the building Inscription of Senwosret I from a leather roll, Berlin 3029, Middle Kingdom. Translation from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 116.

²⁹ Translation of The Maxims of Ptahhotep from *ibid.*, 67.

³⁰ Translation of the Cairo Calendar, day 10 of the first month of Akhet and day 22 of Shemu, A. Bakir, *The Cairo Calendar*, 1966.

³¹ Translation of the Cairo Calendar, day 23 of the first month of Peret, *ibid.*

age of 35.³² Other positive pronouncements could declare that the child would grow to be “honourable,”³³ “noble,”³⁴ “rich,”³⁵ or “die as one honoured in old age.”³⁶ Being among your people in death, too, was desired and a very positive fortune.³⁷

Unfortunately, there were far more negative days to be born than positive, and there were many ways that one might meet their end. Some days were just unlucky; of these dates the calendar states, “Anyone born this day will not live.”³⁸ Other days had more specific negative fates that told those born they would face deaths that came from an animal such as “the snake,”³⁹ “the crocodile,”⁴⁰ or the “trampling of the bull.”⁴¹ Physical ailments, too, could be predicted to affect a

³² See M. Masali and B. Chiarelli, “Data on the Remains of Ancient Egyptians,” 165.

³³ Translation of the Cairo Calendar, day 29 of the second month of Akhet from A. Bakir, *The Cairo Calendar*.

³⁴ Translation of the Cairo Calendar, days 9 and 24 of the first month of Akhet and day 10 of the second Month of Shemu, *ibid*.

³⁵ Translation of the Cairo Calendar, day 23 of the first month of Peret, *ibid*.

³⁶ Translation of day 10 of Akhet & day 22 of Shemu, *ibid*. Also, similarly, one could die at “a good old age” as in day 10 of the second month of Akhet, translation, *ibid*.

³⁷ Translation of the Cairo Calendar, day 4 of the first month of Peret, *ibid*.

³⁸ Translation of the Cairo Calendar, days 11 and 23 of the first month of Akhet, day 23 of the third month of Akhet, day 22 of the fourth month of Peret, day 15 of the second month of Shemu, and day 23 of the third month of Shemu, *ibid*.

³⁹ Translation of the Cairo Calendar day 27 of the second month of Akhet, *ibid*.

⁴⁰ Translation of the Cairo Calendar, days 3 and 16 of the first month of Akhet and day 23 of the second month of Akhet, *ibid*.

⁴¹ Translation of the Cairo Calendar, day 6 of the first month of Akhet and Day 25 of the second month of Akhet, *ibid*.

newly born person, and of some it was said they would die of blindness,⁴² a skin-rash,⁴³ from his ears,⁴⁴ or due to pestilence.⁴⁵ One could even die from copulation,⁴⁶ and more unfortunate, away from his people in a foreign land.⁴⁷ Though these pronouncements did not predict the time of death, these dark futures would have loomed over those to whom they were given.

“If He Says *njj*, He Will Live”

Elements of an infant’s first acts also could predict if the child was healthy and likely to live. The medico-magical papyri contain three ways to determine if a child will survive. The first, from Papyrus Ebers, suggests that the sound the child makes can determine its health: “Another <way of> recognition of a child on the day on which it is born. If it says *njj*, that means it will live. If it says *nbj*, that means it will die.”⁴⁸ The next entry in Ebers, no. 839, states similarly that another way of recognizing is “If one hears its (the child's) voice groan, that means it will die. If it turns its face down, then that also means it will die.”⁴⁹ It is possible that methods for determining health may stem from the fact that a child is healthy will be able to make clear sounds. Those infants who do not make clear or strong

⁴² Translation of the Cairo Calendar, day 13 of the first month of Akhet, *ibid*.

⁴³ Translation of the Cairo Calendar, day 4 of the second month of Akhet, *ibid*.

⁴⁴ Translation of the Cairo Calendar, day 3 of the fourth month of Akhet, *ibid*.

⁴⁵ Translation of the Cairo Calendar, day 20 of the third month of Akhet, *ibid*.

⁴⁶ Translation of the Cairo Calendar, day 5 of the second month of Akhet, *ibid*.

⁴⁷ Translation of the Cairo Calendar, day 7 of the second month of Akhet, *ibid*.

⁴⁸ English translation of Ebers 838 from the German of H. von Deines, H. Grapow, and W. Westendorf, *Grundriss IV*, 291.

⁴⁹ English translation of Ebers 839 from the German, *ibid*.

cries, or those who are lifeless and/or have limp muscles, likely had health issues that could be a detriment to their survival. Or, it could simply be that culturally, certain sounds or actions by the newborn were believed to be negative and indicative of early death.

In Papyrus Ramesseum IV, there is another test to see if the child will live.

The text states:

Something else that one does for it (the child) on the day on which it is born. A small clump of its placenta [...]; shall be ground in milk; shall be given to it (the child) [in] milk vessels. If it (the child) regurgitates it (the concoction), that means it will die; if it [swallows] it, that means it will live.⁵⁰

Here we see that the placenta was fed to the child in an elixir made with milk. If the child was able to keep down the concoction, he would live, if he spit it up, he would die. It is possible that this test was looking for an unobstructed airway and digestive tract that would allow the child to take in milk. If for some reason the child was not able to swallow, he would not have been able to survive long. Or again, the infant's reaction to the test could have been evaluated based on a cultural belief that is not reflected in the source material.

Once the fate of the child and its health had been determined, it was likely that the child would have received some type of immediate ritual protection. Though there is evidence for later postpartum protection, there is only one surviving instance for protection of the child on the actual day of the birth. The text of Papyrus Ramesseum IV states: "Creating protection for a child on the day on which it is born. [.....] a small clump of feces on it, after it (the child) has come

⁵⁰ English translation of Papyrus Ramesseum IV, lines 17-24, from the German, *ibid.*

out (*h3j*) out of the vulva of the mother [.....].”⁵¹ Unfortunately, this text is damaged and it is unknown if it was truly feces that was put on the child. In any case, some type of compound was put on the child for protection.

“Remedy For a Woman Who Suffers”

Once the child was attended to, it is likely that the woman also would have received medico-magical assistance. Unfortunately, women’s bodies can suffer a variety of traumas, infections, and illnesses during and after childbirth. Even in otherwise unremarkable birthing scenarios, women’s vulvas may be bruised and swollen and they can also suffer from vaginal or perineal lacerations and painful after-contractions as the uterus begins to return to its pre-pregnancy size.⁵² In less ideal situations, women can suffer uterine or cervical rupture, tearing in the vaginal wall, or issues with retained placental matter. All of these issues can cause great pain, infection, hemorrhage, and, in some cases, death. If Egyptian women sustained and survived these traumas, they could still suffer from related weakness, illness, infection, and long-term health issues, and death.

When women give birth, they can have pain in their teeth and heads from the strain of the intense pushing of labor. Interestingly, the Egyptians had a preventative prescription for this issue that a woman could use prior to labor. In Papyrus Kahun we find a remedy for “not allowing that a woman has a toothache [...]” The text tells us that “Beans shall be ground [.....] on/onto her teeth (*nḥd.t*)

⁵¹ English translation of Papyrus Ramesseum IV, lines 15-16, from the German, *ibid.*

⁵² Dr. Lewis Wall, personal communication.

on the day when she gives birth. [That is] the removing of a toothache. Really excellent, a million times!”⁵³

Another remedy from the Kahun Papyrus shows us that the Egyptians were well aware that the vulva and perineum of a woman could have been swollen and tender after delivery and they attempted remedies to ease the pain.

Papyrus Kahun 4 reads:

Remedy for a woman who suffers from [illness of] the pubic region (*kns*), her vulva, the area around her vulva (*dꜣdꜣ.t*), between her buttocks. Then you shall say about it: [this is] a substantial enlargement <because of> having given birth. Then you shall use this remedy; fresh oil, one Hin; shall be poured (*iwh*) her vulva, her [...].⁵⁴

Other cases in the medico-magical texts note suffering in other parts of the body due to giving birth. Another remedy from Papyrus Kahun tells us that when a woman “who suffers from illness of all her limbs, <and> who suffers from illness of both eye sockets” that this is a problem due to a “manifestation of *gꜣ.t* <because of> the uterus.” This pain seems to be related to a uterine issues associated with childbirth, as the text further notes that “It is not possible for her to drink...completely because of recently giving birth.” The text suggests that as a remedy, one should “create a drink for the woman *hpꜣ* from mash (*ꜣh*) with (*hr*) water; shall be drunk on four mornings.”⁵⁵ It is possible that this drink was created to assist a woman regain strength after birth, a practice that is common

⁵³ English translation of Kahun 5 from the German, *ibid.*, 268.

⁵⁴ English translation of Kahun 4 from the German, *ibid.*

⁵⁵ English translation of Kahun 6 from the German, *ibid.*

in many cultures.⁵⁶ Many other magico-medical texts also note ailments connected or attributed to the uterus, though it is unclear if these issues were directly or indirectly related to childbirth.⁵⁷

Another issue that could cause women pain and infection after childbirth was retaining parts of the placenta within the uterus. In normal birthing situations, the placenta is generally delivered within minutes, but can come up to an hour after the child. The Egyptians were likely aware that when the placenta did not come out with the child, complications could occur for the mother. While it is unknown if they would have cut the umbilical cord in normal circumstances before the placenta was delivered, they did recognize issues due to retained placental material and also had remedies that would assist a woman to expel what was in her womb, a likely reference to the placenta or postpartum effluvia.

In Papyrus Kahun 17 there is likely a remedy for a woman who suffers from retained placental material. The text states: “Remedy for a woman, blood [...] placenta, and she suffers from [illness of] her head, her mouth (?), the [...] of her hand. The medico-magical practitioner is to prepare a remedy of “sediment (*tꜣḥ.t*) from sweet beer shall be applied to the soles of her feet, [...].” The remedy notes that if “nothing comes loose from her” then the practitioner should “put date

⁵⁶ In many parts of the world, drinks are given to sustain the mother and give her strength after birth. In Navajo culture, women receive an herbal tea right after birth. Mexican women are traditionally given a thin cornmeal gruel called *atole*. M. Kay, *Anthropology of Human Birth*, 19-20.

⁵⁷ Ailments caused by the uterus occur in many medico-magical texts. Due to the fact that these texts do not explicitly mention childbirth, they have been excluded from the present discussion. However, this does not mean that they were not used for postpartum concerns.

juice in *msš*-condition on top of the sediment (*tšh.t*) [...]; she shall be made to sit on it.” In this case, censing was resorted to if the application of the material to the feet did not work, and if the censing did not work, in this case “[If] she discharges nothing, then you shall cause [...] to cool down, [she] shall be made to drink [it].” Unfortunately the last part of the text is damaged but notes that “[If], however, she discharges blood or *šhšw*-discharge [...]”⁵⁸ It may have been the case that if the placenta did not come forth, but other fluid did, a different remedy may have been prescribed.

Additionally, it is possible that the remedies of Papyrus Ebers 798 and 799 are also meant to help a woman discharge the placenta or other materials in the womb. Ebers 798 states that it is “Another (remedy) to cause that everything which is in the womb of a woman to depart.” The remedy, which is said to be a “shard from a new *hnw*-pot; shall be ground in oil/fat,” can be made into a liquid that “shall be warmed, shall be poured into her genitals (*iwf*).”⁵⁹ The next remedy was made of “date juice in *msš*-condition; salt from lower Egypt; oil/fat” that instead of being inserted vaginally should first “be boiled;” and then “drunk at body temperature.”⁶⁰

Though only touching on a few of the postpartum ailments that women would have suffered, the existence of these types of remedies for postpartum issues shows that care of women’s bodies following childbirth was not just part of

⁵⁸ English translation of Kahun 17 from the German, *ibid.*, 270.

⁵⁹ English translation of Ebers 798 from the German, *ibid.*, 279.

⁶⁰ English translation of Ebers 799 from the German, *ibid.*

the culture of the home or women, but that medico-magical practitioners, too, could assist with these types of issues, bringing both physical and mental comfort to their charges.

“His Wife Was In Childbirth”

While mothers did the work of labor, and were likely assisted predominantly by women, it seems that the men in their lives, while probably not in the birth room, were not absent during their labors. As we have seen in Papyrus Westcar, Rawoser waits patiently in the house for the birth of his children and is the one who is charged with paying the birth attendants.⁶¹ Further evidence from Deir el Medina suggests that men could be absent from work when their children were born, and in some cases, the whole gang may have been given the day off and/or received presents when a child was born.

In one of the clearest cases of paternal leave, we see that in “Month 2 of Akhet, day 23,” those who were absent included “Kasa” as “his wife was in childbirth, so he was idle 3 days.”⁶² Another record of birth, which also might note a father’s absence, or possibly just records a birth, occurs late in “Month 3 of Peret” when a fragmented text tells us “[...] Hesysunebef [...] his wife bore [...]”⁶³ It is unknown if husbands taking days off work was common practice, or if this happened when the women had difficult labors or needed assistance at home. Unfortunately with all the village and state holidays and other sanctioned

⁶¹ M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 221.

⁶² Author’s translation of O. Cairo CG 25517.

⁶³ Author’s translation of O. Cairo CG 25516.

days off, as well as damaged and incomplete work journals, it is difficult to postulate more on the nature of paternal leave in the workman's village. But we may assume that men would have taken time off from work, whatever their occupation, to be with their wives and newly born children.

In other interesting records from Deir el Medina, it seems that the birth of a child could be celebrated by the whole village. One journal entry notes that during "Month 3 of Akhet, day 4, [...] a child was born. They received [...]"⁶⁴ Though again damaged, it is possible the men received some type of food or other item(s) in celebration of the birth of a child. Another entry states that during "Month 1 of Peret" the men of the gang were noted as "idle day 16 since a child was born."⁶⁵ Whether or not the men normally received a full day off of work, of if this was the birth of a child of one of the foremen or other important members of the village, is unknown.

It seems logical that men would have taken part, at least to some extent, in the birth of their children. Episodes in literature suggest that after the birth of a child, the father was likely close by and notified. In Papyrus Westcar, when the children arrive, they are announced to Rawoser, with the midwives saying "Rejoice, Rawoser! Three children are born to you."⁶⁶ In *The Tale of the Two Brothers*, when the Queen gives birth to the child of Bata it is said, presumably of one of the birth attendants, that "One went to tell his majesty: 'A son has been

⁶⁴ Author's translation of O. Cairo CG 25531.

⁶⁵ Author's translation of O. Cairo JE 72452.

⁶⁶ Translation of Papyrus Westcar from M. Lichtheim, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, 221.

born to you.”⁶⁷ And, in Setne II, when the first child of Setne and Mehusekhe was born, it was said, “they cradled [him] and nursed him.” Though vaguely worded, this may refer to both Setne and Mehusekhe cuddling with the newborn child.

It is possible that in addition to the announcement of the birth of the child, presenting a child to its father may have been an important part of the child’s entrance into the family, and likely, to society. This presentation of the child appears both in literature and after the rebirth of the deceased in the funerary realm. In Setne I, when the child of Naneferkaptah and Ahwere is born, Ahwere notes that “When my time of bearing came, I bore this boy who is before you, who was named Merib. He was entered in the register of the House of Life.”⁶⁸ The child Merib, noted as the one “who is before you,” may refer to the presentation of the child, and just after his acceptance the recording of his birth into the House of Life. It is likely that this type of presentation and acceptance had social and legal importance for the child and his future position and rights of inheritance.

Interestingly, in the funerary realm the recognition of the deceased as the child of the gods also seems important to entrance into the beyond. In Coffin Text 286, which opens the chapter, we see the deceased is reborn as Horus, and he is presented to and accepted by his father:

O you plebs, look on me, the son of Isis; I was conceived in Pe and born in Chemmis; I was nursed in the Field of Fire on the day when I was

⁶⁷Translation of The Tale of The Two Brothers, from M. Lichtheim, *The New Kingdom*, 210.

⁶⁸ Translation of Setne I from M. Lichtheim, *The Late Period*, 128.

received (?) on the birth-stool, I was taken to my father Atum and he gave me the ornaments of his father Gēb; I entered the horizon.⁶⁹

Additionally, in Pyramid Text 265, we see that when the king is ferried over the sky to Re the king is summoned “That they may tell me my name, that of the good one, to Rēa, And that they may announce my name, that of the good one, to *Nḥbw-kꜣw*.”⁷⁰ Here, the name of the king is of central importance, as is the pronunciation of the name, and the announcement of the newly reborn to his protector and nurturer, in this case, the snake god, Nehebkau.

We see in the text above, as well as in the statement by the god Re that after his birth: “My father and my mother told me my name,”⁷¹ that the giving and pronouncement of the child’s name was likely an important part of birth practice. However, it is unknown at what point the child would have received its name after its birth. Since names were such an important part of the person in Egypt, we can assume that if the child did not receive his name right at the time of birth with its fate, the name would have been given soon after. It also seems likely, based on the sources, that this ritual would have been carried out in the presence of the child’s father and, possibly, in front of other family members.

⁶⁹ Translation of Coffin Text 286, a spell for becoming a falcon, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, 214.

⁷⁰ Translation of Pyramid Text 265, a spell for crossing the horizon, from R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 75.

⁷¹ Papyrus Turin 1993, translation from R. Ritner, “The Legend of Isis and the Name of Re,” *Context of Scripture Online*, Brill Online, 2012, http://www.paulonline.brill.nl/entries/context-of-scripture/the-legend-of-isis-and-the-name-of-re-1-22-aCOSB_1_22 (accessed June 15, 2012).

Like Horus or the sun, once the child made it through the vaginal opening, he was welcomed on the arms of his birth attendants. Care was taken to clear his airway, cut his cord, and clean his limbs. If he had made it through the journey, hopefully he passed the tests of health and could look forward to a happy fate. His mother, too, would have received attention to help ease her postpartum pain and address any birth trauma she may have sustained. Unfortunately, even in the best of birthing scenarios both mother and child still had a long road ahead before both would be out of harm's way. Luckily, as with birth, the afflictions that affected the nursing mother and her young infant, like those that troubled Isis and Horus, could be managed through myth-mirroring postpartum space and mythically charged medico-magical and magical means. Egyptian mothers could keep becoming Isis for their protection and that of their children.

CHAPTER 9

Conclusion

You will never find a story from ancient Egypt where the outcome of a mortal woman's pregnancy and labor is anything but the birth of a healthy male child. Birth, and specifically the birth of healthy male children, was desired in this society that valued children for both familial and social reasons. Yet, high maternal and infant mortality rates were the reality. With an aversion to discussing dangerous or threatening states, and faced with the real world knowledge of fertility issues, as well as pregnancy and birth related complications, it is not surprising that the Egyptians rarely referenced these processes and the liminal state that women entered when they became pregnant. To combat these real world fears and issues the Egyptians developed a complex and mythically coded system that included the use of divinely charged space, magic, and remedies to manage reproductive lives and experiences. Appealing to gods, and in many cases, actually becoming them, they attempted to secure positive outcomes for their reproductive events.

We can assume that women and their families discussed, at least to some extent, conception, pregnancy, labor, and delivery, including fears and negative outcomes. Yet, formally, these processes and states were presented in little detail and only in terms of positive experiences and outcomes. Thus, an analysis that more fully accesses lived reproductive lives must come from a wide variety of sources that were not composed for, or often related to, real world birth. These sources include episodes of conception, pregnancy, and birth of the gods and

men from literature, funerary, magical and medico-magical texts, and royal inscriptions and village documents.

This presentation of conceptions, beliefs, and practices relies heavily on episodes of mythic birth; these reproductive episodes, coming not from the physical realm, but from the divine, are more freely discussed. In many cases, the episodes come from a funerary context, and because these texts focused on and were created to facilitate and protect and secure the process of rebirth, they retain elements of successful real world birth. Funerary texts that equate the deceased with gods that had successful births, like the infant god Horus and the sun god, Re, retain and employ, though often through allusion and metaphor, a great deal of birth language and information that points to reproductive conceptions and practices from the physical realm. Supporting these texts with iconographic parallels and/or material culture that clarifies the relationship between these myths, belief, and practice, this study puts forth the first full overview of Egyptian reproductive conceptions and associated practices.

Becoming Isis

Begetting children was an essential part of family life and social order in ancient Egypt. As such, Egyptian men and women were not just interested and concerned with their own fertility, but considered fertility and correct sexual function an essential part of masculine and feminine identity. The centrality of sexuality and fecundity caused men and women to both ensure and protect their reproductive bodies in the physical realm through spells and prayers. Fertility

was also essential for rebirth into the spiritual realm and therefore, the dead were also provided with spells to protect their sexual identity and function.

Egyptian textual sources reflect the importance of male creative power and women's complementary powers to incite and house creation. Given the Egyptians understanding of the life-giving properties of sperm, and little understanding of the female's early contribution of the egg in the creation of the child, it is not surprising that the divine figures imbued with creative function were male. These male gods were often depicted ithyphallic and praised for their ability to create life. In literature, men are praised for their physical beauty and they induce desire in women. In representation, no matter their age, they are most commonly depicted as virile young men at the height of their physical and sexual prowess. If a man were unlucky enough to lose his penis, the root of his sexual power, he became powerless and was equated to a woman. Male infertility, too, was cause for scorn.

Women, though without the power to create life, were responsible for spurring creation. In religious texts, they are praised for their abilities to arouse male gods, and also for their ability to house the seeds that are imparted to them and shaped into children. Women, like men, were most often depicted at their most beautiful, with tight clothes that highlight their sexualized attributes, including their hair, breasts, and pubic area. This type of depiction did not detract from their ability to be mothers and symbols of motherhood and nurturing feminine power as sexuality and motherhood were not separated in the same way that they are today in the modern West. Female infertility was recognized,

and because the ability to bear children was such an essential part of feminine identity, a variety of methods for determining female fertility were created and carried out. Though we do not know what the Egyptians believed caused infertility, it can be assumed that malevolent spirits and neighbors were most often believed to be the cause of such trouble. The gods and the dead, too, could assist with such conditions and they were appealed to when both men and women hoped for children.

The Egyptians understood that coitus led to conception, and, aside from a few exceptional conceptions in the divine realm and literature, most often, creation was represented as occurring through vaginal intercourse. Though not always referenced explicitly in sources, in literature, specifically, a variety of euphemisms were employed to suggest coitus. When these euphemisms were employed, the outcome was always a pregnancy, and eventually, the birth of a healthy male child. From the divine and funerary realms, we find more explicit references to the relationship between coitus and conception, as well as important information on the male and female roles in creating the child. Fathers were believed to contribute the soul of a child, while mothers were responsible for molding the child in the womb and nurturing it until birth. The gods, too, played a role in conception and creation of the child, both imbuing men with creative power and assisting women to form and sustain the child.

Pregnancy was likely often detected when a woman's menstrual period ceased. The cessation of menstruation was used in literature as a "mark" of pregnancy, and we can assume women with regular cycles would have often

found this to be one of the first signs of conception. Though there is little mention of the early physical symptoms and signs of pregnancy, tests to determine fertility seem to have looked for many of these markers, such as breast changes, enlarged veins, and nausea. Once a woman believed she was pregnant, a fairly reliable urine test could have been carried out to determine if she was with child. If this test was not available to her, her growing belly and the movements of her child, felt some time in the second trimester, would have clued her in to her new liminal state. It seems likely that if they did not know already, her child's father and her family would have been notified of the pregnancy. Immediate protection would have been carried out for the women and her unborn child, likely in the form of spells and amulets.

As her time of labor approached, it is likely that protected ritual space would have been planned and created for the birth of her child. Textual references to birth space from the realm of the gods suggest that this space would have been private and secluded, likely within the woman's house. Though birth space would have varied with a woman's socioeconomic status, care would have been taken to make the space safe and mythically potent. Depictions and material culture that shows birth space suggest that it was created to mirror the mythic birth space of mother goddesses such as Isis, Hathor, and Nut. These constructions and implements invoked not just the goddesses and their places of bearing, but more important, attempted to mirror the outcome of their positive birth scenarios. It is even likely that these spaces and implements were used in

spells of transfiguration so the laboring woman could actually become the archetype and have a safe and protected labor and birth.

When a woman labored, she would have been assisted by birth attendants. Likely women from the woman's family or village, these attendants would have provided both psychological and physical assistance to the parturient woman. Engaging in ritually protective music, dance, and chants, these attendants would have both distracted the woman from her pain and eased her fears. Though it is unknown if formally trained magical or medico-magical practitioners would have been involved in a woman's labor, it is clear that spells were composed that were meant to ease and manage labor. Spells were employed to call the divine patrons of birth to the birth space and others were used to open the uterus and quicken labor. As a woman's labor progressed to its later stages, spells to unbind the child from the birth canal and those to bring down the placenta, the amniotic fluid, and even the child itself could have been used. If the woman was lucky, she would have a quick and safe labor. However, it is clear from human remains that often this was not the case, and it is likely that women who had abnormally small pelves and those whose babies did not present head-down suffered painful and often tissue-damaging labors.

As the child struggled towards birth, it, like its mother, was likened to those divinities that had successful births, such as Horus and the sun god, Re. The infant's journey was as treacherous for the child as it was for its mother. If the child was victorious over chaos, it came forth from the body of its mother and took its first breath. The child was received on the arms of the same attendants

that had cared for its mother and given practical and ritual care. Umbilical cord cut, it was cleaned and massaged. Predictions were given for the child's fate and to determine its viability. If the child was healthy, and the mother was able, the child was likely given over to its mother to be nurtured. Because childbirth, even in ideal situations, can cause swelling and pain for the mother, medico-magical remedies, likely given by medico-magical practitioners, were available to ease pain. If the birth was less than ideal and/or the child was not healthy, it is likely that the mother and child would have received whatever care was available to keep them comfortable. As they entered the postpartum period, spells of protection and transfiguration would have been continually used to keep mother and child safe from those forces that threatened them.

From the conception of the child to its birth, Egyptian women sought to become powerful mother goddesses. Isis, Hathor, and Nut served as the archetypes and vehicles to attain positive pregnancy and birth outcomes. Their children, like Horus and Re, could be born safely, maintaining order and ensuring the continuation of the family in both the physical and spiritual realms.

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