





## **Childbirth and Women's Health in Pre-Modern Societies**

Joint workshop by projects C1 “Medical Systems”  
and C11 “Medicine and Religion in Premodern East Asia”

### **Workshop**

**November 4 – 5, 2011**

Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies

69115 Heidelberg

Voßstraße 2, Building 4400

Conference Room 212

## Outline and Themes

### I. Outline

This workshop aims to offer different perspectives on how birth and the health problems related to it were conceptualized and practically dealt with in pre-modern times. Under the loose label of “pre-modern”, we intend to present a picture of the medical spheres on birth and women’s health in the ancient Near East, Indo-Iranian, Graeco-Roman and East-Asian systems.

The “pre-modern” here refers to that expanded set of multiple spatial, chronological and cultural conditions in which, through a variety of media, the human agents had learnt, transmitted and practiced medicine before (or in parallel to) the implementation of the historical scientific discourses that were to make a base for the present Western modes of interpretation. The role played by writing and the production of cultural knowledge in the whole process of conceptualizing, understanding, learning, and managing the complex experience of birth, therefore, will be a key element in the articulation of the whole thematic programme of the workshop.

By this, we believe we will be able to bring together different perspectives, traditions, concepts, and practices regarding a common human experience, as well as to enliven the historical discussion by enlarging the cultural settings considered.

### II. Themes

The papers presented at the workshop should ideally refer to some of these points, and the speakers are warmly requested to bear in mind the historical questions here proposed when engaging in the discussion.

### Sources

- Production of knowledge regarding birth and women’s health: how and where is knowledge produced, and who is engaged in the process? Through what mechanisms is knowledge gained, adopted and adapted? Which patterns are followed in the processes of transmission of knowledge?
- The production of textual knowledge. Text and context: Who writes the texts concerning birth and birth management? For what purpose? How are the texts transmitted? Where are they kept? What is the attitude towards the written text? Should it be divulged or kept from strangers and “not initiates”? Who is the audience of written texts?

- Authoritative and non-authoritative works. Authority and authorship.
- Written text and empiricism. The written and the oral in birth attendance/assistance.
- Relationship between text and image.

### **Attitudes**

- What does the moment of birth represent in a specific culture with relation to the concepts of life, death, (im)purity, etc?
- Attitudes towards the female body (also relates to “Management”: who has access to the women’s body?).
- Attitudes towards women in relation to their capacity or incapacity of conceiving and giving birth.
- Divine births and human births.

### **Management**

- Health problems that emerge during birth (including considerations regarding aetiology).
- Who takes care of women during birth? How do they take care of them? Are there differences of approach among the various professionals involved?
- Types of intervention (technical manipulation of the body, materia medica employed, rituals and recitations, etc).
- Where does birth take place? Is there a specific room or structure specially allocated for this purpose?
- Before, during, afterwards: conceptualization of time in (the act of giving) birth.
- Management of the newborn.
- Processing of the afterbirth.

## Workshop schedule

### Friday, November 4

14.00 – 14.15            Opening, Address by Coordinators C1 and C11

#### **PANEL ONE: CONCEPTUAL FRAMES**

14.15 – 15.00            Presentation 1: Jessey Choo  
"‘The Dew on the Grass’ and ‘the Yogurty Little Lump’: Medieval Chinese Conceptualizations of Fetus and Fetal Development"

15.00 – 15.45            Presentation 2: Susanne Töpfer  
"‘... He opens his amnion. He swims in his redness.’ – The physical activity of parturition in textual and epigraphical sources in Ancient Egypt from the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC till the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD"

15.45 – 16.15            *Coffee Break*

#### **PANEL TWO: TEXTS**

16.15 – 17.00            Presentation 3: Katja Triplett  
"Care of the reproductive female body in the medico – ritual world of early and medieval Japan"

17.00 – 17.45            Presentation 4: Hans-Werner Fischer-Elfert  
"From theory to practice – A pregnancy spell put into action (pBrooklyn Museum 47.218.2 col. x+III.1–4 plus pBerlin P. 15784+10469)"

17.45 – 18.45            General discussion/Coffee

Screening of Paolo Delaini’s documentary “Legami e riti”

19.30                      *Conference Dinner*

## **Saturday, November 5**

9.15 – 9.30            Address by Coordinators C1 and C11

### **PANEL THREE: THERAPIES**

9.30 – 10.15            Presentation 5: Friedhelm Hoffmann  
"The Gynaecological Recipes of the Egyptian Papyrus Vienna D 6257"

10.15 – 11.00            Presentation 6: M. Erica Couto-Ferreira  
"‘She will give birth easily’: Therapeutic approaches in 1st millennium B.C.  
cuneiform texts on birth"

11.00 – 11.30            *Coffee Break*

### **PANEL FOUR: AGENCIES**

11.30 – 12.15            Presentation 7: Carmen Caballero-Navas  
"‘... and she will give birth immediately’. Pregnancy and childbirth in medieval  
Hebrew medical texts produced in the Mediterranean west"

12.15 – 13.00            Presentation 8: Anna Andreeva  
"Rituals for Safe Pregnancy and Birth in Late Medieval and Early Modern Japan"

13.00 – 14.00            *Lunch*

### **PANEL FIVE: LIMINALITY AND MOTHERHOOD**

14.00 – 14.45            Presentation 9: Paolo Delaini  
"The liminality of birth in Avestan framework"

14.45 – 15.30            Presentation 10: Giulia Pedrucci  
"Breastfeeding and Motherhood in Ancient Greece: A Medical and Philosophical  
Point of View"

15.30 – 16.00            *Coffee Break*

16.00 – 17.30            General discussion

17.30                      Closing of the conference

19.30                      *Dinner* (not covered)

## Abstracts

### **Anna Andreeva (University of Heidelberg)**

*Rituals for Safe Pregnancy and Birth in Late Medieval and Early Modern Japan*

The strategies for maintaining women's health were a matter of serious concern in premodern societies. In addition to physicians' knowledge about the workings of female body, Japan's religious environment produced a plethora of apotropaic rituals that ensured safe conception and delivery, and at times, even a change of the foetus' gender. Before the fifteenth century, such rituals were based on predominantly Buddhist cosmological knowledge and were performed mostly for political reasons, usually by high-ranking monks for the sake of their private donors and members of ruling elite and imperial house. However, much less is known about the popularisation of these apotropaic rituals. As part of an ongoing research, this paper investigates a series of ritual prescriptions for women, regarding infertility, conception, pregnancy, easy or complicated birth and safe child rearing, which circulated widely in late medieval and early modern Japan. It will survey the issues of ritual pollution, social and religious constructions of women's bodies, the combinatory nature of these ritual prescriptions and outline the broader context in which such rituals may have been performed. While analysing the ideas underpinning the ritual segments, the paper will concentrate on the use of esoteric Buddhist elements, such as the Siddham syllables, mantras and mudras, during childbirth, removal of the placenta and avoiding birth complications as well as practical prescriptions for falling pregnant.

### **Carmen Caballero-Navas (Universidad de Granada)**

*"... and she will give birth immediately". Pregnancy and childbirth in medieval Hebrew medical texts produced in the Mediterranean west*

Between the late 12th-century and the end of the Middle Ages, a genre of medical literature dedicated to the care of women's health circulated in Hebrew throughout the Mediterranean West. So far, more than twenty texts belonging to this genre have been identified. While nearly half of them bear explicit reference in their titles to the domains of fertility, pregnancy and childbirth, all of them devote considerable portions (or even the whole) of their contents to discuss these issues. In my view, this very fact tells us of the extent to which the society that produced and consumed this kind of literature was preoccupied by this sphere of care. However, the preoccupation articulated in the texts did not always respond to the same interests, but differed depending on the agents that mediated the written accounts, both the writers/translator/copyists and the audience to which they were addressed. In the main, the texts, mostly authored by men, show a theoretical approach largely based on the Graeco-Arabic traditions of medicine, shared by Christian and Jews in the Middle Ages. However, and despite the difficulty to perceive human action behind written

texts, traces of actual practice often permeate the recommendations aimed at facilitating conception, caring for pregnant women, and managing childbirth, which were mostly on women's hands until the end of this period. This paper discusses the approach of written texts, i.e. male physicians, to childbirth as a key element in the explanation of women's health and the functioning of the female body. It also explores the role of this approach in the creation of meanings for both the female body and sexual difference, and examines female management of pregnancy and childbirth as recorded in Hebrew medical literature.

**Jessey Choo (University of Missouri-Kansas City)**

*'The Dew on the Grass' and 'the Yogurty Little Lump': Medieval Chinese Conceptualizations of Fetus and Fetal Development*

The medieval Chinese (c. 200-1000 CE) used many similes to describe human fetus and fetal development. The similes for the embryo, for example, ranged from poetic (the dew on the grass) to empirical (the yogurty little lump). Behind the choice of similes lied understanding of conception and pregnancy. The paper examines three most representative views found in the medieval texts — the cosmic view that saw human life begins and matures in the same way as the universe following the interplays of yin-yang and five phases; the Buddhist view that focused on the mechanics of karma and the fetus and the pain it felt in each of the 38 weeks of gestation; the (magico-)medical view that treated pregnancy as the continuous meeting and exchanging of various bodily and spiritual essences. The Buddhist view was surprisingly the most “scientific” while the contemporary (magico-)medical view served as the basis of prenatal care. Moreover, evidences suggest that medieval Chinese did not often hold separately these seemingly different views. The paper concludes by arguing that their confluence both conceptually and metaphorically in medieval discourses was due to the increasingly sophisticated medical practices and the continued emphasis on filial piety in social and religious thinking.

**M. Erica Couto-Ferreira (University of Heidelberg)**

*She will give birth easily: Therapeutic approaches in 1st millennium B.C. cuneiform texts on birth*

The present paper aims at exploring the different kinds of treatment documented in Mesopotamian medical practice to ensure a fast and easy delivery. I will centre mainly, but not exclusively, on the written material that was collected, copied and studied during the 1st millennium B.C. in neo-Assyrian scholarly contexts. In the course of my research, I have noticed that 1st millennium medical texts offered a variety of remedies and technical approaches to guarantee a safe parturition that were not attested in older written material. What's more, this previously unattested medical information is placed more

often than not in the path of tradition, by way of integrating these new therapies into the bulk of older well-attested birth procedures. Having this in mind, I will focus, on the one hand, on the patterns and sources used for first millennium text creation on birth; on the other, I will present an analysis on the qualities of the technical knowledge and overlapping of approaches to prompt birth, which include rituals, dietary prescriptions, application of stones, and plant-based remedies.

**Paolo Delaini (Università di Bologna)**

*The liminality of birth in Avestan framework*

The Avesta, the Sacred book of Zoroastrians, contains some references to birth and delivery. We have some interesting information on beliefs surrounding birth in Zoroastrian times, thanks to a book of Avesta: the Widewdad. This text is a sort of Zoroastrian Leviticus and describes the rules and laws that regulate pregnancy. Starting from a religious standpoint, surrounded by prohibitions and fear of impurity, we will attempt to enter into the world of Zoroastrian beliefs related to birth, gathering information about demons, magical practices, medical prescriptions and precautions concerning breastfeeding and quarantine.

**Hans-Werner Fischer-Elfert (University of Leipzig)**

*From theory to practice – A pregnancy spell put into action (pBrooklyn Museum 47.218.2 col. x+III.1-4 plus pBerlin P. 15784+10469)*

Magical means to prevent abortion during pregnancy were part of Ancient Egyptian obstetrics. A brief incantation addressed to all the gods of heaven and earth on a Brooklyn gynecological manual (ed. I. Guermeur in prep.), as well as on a private Berlin amulet (ed. H.-W. Fischer-Elfert in prep.), attest to this peril. A close comparison between these two manuscripts not only helps to reconstruct the wording of the spell, but also to complement its vignette. Whereas the Brooklyn variant has left a space for this to the left of the text, the Berlin version supplies another example of the well-known motif of young Horus between the horns of his celestial mother Nut.

**Friedhelm Hoffmann (University of Munich)**

*The Gynaecological Recipes of the Egyptian Papyrus Vienna D 6257*

The collection of recipes of Papyrus Vienna D 6257 (second century AD) is the result of 1000 years of textual tradition as can be seen from the non-uniform language of the text. Thus the papyrus proves to be an important link between (1.) the older Egyptian medicine of the second millennium BC, (2.) the medicine of the hitherto very much neglected first millennium BC and (3.) the Graeco-Roman period in Egypt. The paper focuses

on the 50 gynaecological recipes which constitute more than a quarter of the manuscript.

**Giulia Pedrucci (Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei Roma)**

*Breastfeeding and Motherhood in Ancient Greece: A Medical and Philosophical Point of View*

From an analysis of the Archaic and Classical sources, we get a female stereotype in which the woman and the mother aspect overlap to a point where they practically coincide. In particular, looking at the medical and philosophical sources, we get the idea that in the Greek thought a woman has to be a mother, both for her own welfare and benefit and for the welfare and benefit of the community. Connected with motherhood, we have the very controversial issue of breastfeeding: the cultural implications of a gesture that only apparently is only natural are very numerous, and are largely connected with the theory of the derivation of breastfeeding milk from the menstrual blood.

**Susanne Töpfer (University of Heidelberg)**

*"... He opens his amnion. He swims in his redness." – The physical activity of parturition in textual and epigraphical sources in Ancient Egypt from the 2nd millennium BC till the 3rd century AD*

Many medical and magical texts concerning childbirth and delivery are known from Ancient Egypt. Most of them are spells, incantations, remedies and prescriptions for the woman in labour, to accelerate the delivery or to protect the unborn child and the parturient. The medical and magical texts do not contain any descriptions of the parturition itself. But we have some literary and mythological texts, as well as a few incantations, which describe the biological act of childbirth and also miscarriage in more detail. Besides the textual sources, the decoration of temple walls and Mammisis (birth houses) as well as illustrations on a birth brick and ostraca (shards of pottery or stone) provide an insight into the moment of delivery. In this paper I want to focus on the 'scientific' depiction of the biological act of childbirth, how it is described in non-medical sources. Although the main sources are mythological- theological texts with a lot of analogies, it is amazing how many details these texts provide. They contain descriptions which would be expected in the context of medical sources.

**Katja Triplett (University of Marburg)**

*Care of the reproductive female body in the medico-ritual world of early and medieval Japan*

This paper focuses on the first medical work produced in Japan: the *Ishinpo*, compiled by court physician Tanba no Yasuyori in the late 10th century CE. The

chapters on ensuring the wellbeing and health of a pregnant woman and the foetus, and on safe delivery and postnatal care, will be introduced as part of a jealously guarded text written by a physician for physicians. Other sources elucidating the historical context suggest that the exchange and circulation of this 'secret' knowledge was more dynamic than previously thought. Closely woven networks between court physicians and (elite) members of Buddhist institutions existed and developed further in the Japanese medieval period. Instead of looking at the ancient methods of treatment through a modern 'scientific' lens and sorting them into 'proto-scientific' and 'superstitious' categories, medico-ritual views on the female body, the unborn and birth are explored as facets of the worldview prevalent in Tanba no Yasuyori's time.