

BIRTH. The Egyptian word for birth (*mswt*; in Ptolemaic times, *p'p'*) could be paraphrased "come down to the ground" (*prj hr t3*) and "come forth from the womb" (*prj m ht* or *h3j m ht*). The determinative shows the head and arms of the child protruding from the birth canal of a kneeling woman.

The Egyptians knew that infertility could be due to the mother as well as the father. Couples who did not get the child they wished for tried to influence their fate with prayers presented to a god or goddess, letters to the dead, or prescriptions of medicines and magic. If nothing helped, they could adopt a child. When a woman became pregnant she tried all types of medicine and magic to prevent a miscarriage. Some of those, plus magic spells and medicines to prevent pregnancy, have come down to us. Although most of the remedies are of doubtful origin, some of their contraceptives seem to have had the same effect as the acidic contraceptive jellies do today.

According to an Egyptian belief that dates from the beginning of the fifth century BCE through the Ptolemaic era, the semen produced in the bones of the father was kept in his testicles. With his penis, the father placed the child into the stomach (*ht*) of the mother, who was considered the receptacle for the child. In a few instances, the uterus (*hmt*) was named as the place in which the child developed. Flesh and skin were thought to be formed from the mother's milk. The heart, the site of character, mental power, and feeling, was thought to be derived from the mother.

Other means of conception were portrayed in the world of the gods. For example, the primeval god Atum swallowed his sperm, coughed, and spat out the first couple, who were Shu (*išš*, "to cough"), the god of the air, and Tefnut (*tf*, "to spit out"), the goddess of humidity; this couple then brought forth Geb, the god of the earth, and Nut, the goddess of the sky, in the natural (sexual) way. The god Seth swallowed the sperm of his rival, Horus, and brought forth the disk of the moon god Thoth from the top of his head. The primeval gods Hu ("utterance") and Sia ("perception," "knowledge") generated from the blood of the sun god Re. In a fairy tale, an unfaithful wife becomes pregnant by swallowing a splinter of one of the persea trees, which, because it embodied her husband, she had asked to be cut down.

Medical texts included many means to find out whether a woman had conceived. Besides some doubtful tests, Egyptians, for example, noticed the cessation of menstruation, the swelling of the breasts, the sensitivity to smell, nausea, and the changes in the face and eyes of a pregnant woman. Causing barley and emmer wheat to germinate by watering it daily with the urine of the woman was used as a pregnancy test (and has been proved to be reliable). Since the Old Egyptian word for

barley is in the masculine gender and the word for emmer is feminine, ancient Egyptians believed that the sex of the child could be predicted by which plant sprouted first (proven unreliable).

Pregnant women used perfumed oil to massage themselves, to prevent stretch marks and ease delivery. The oil was preserved in small vessels, usually of calcite, in the shape of a pregnant woman rubbing her abdomen. Although genitals were never marked, one of those vessels showed a prominent tampon, which had the form of the so-called Isis-blood amulet, used, through analogy to the goddess Isis pregnant with Horus, to avoid the loss of blood or a miscarriage. Various mixtures were also poured into a woman's vagina to prevent miscarriage. Developing "in the egg" (*m swht*), in its mother's belly, it was cared for by a god and thus regarded as a human being, which was to be properly buried in case of miscarriage. According to Diodorus Siculus, the first-century Greek historian, an Egyptian law forbade killing a pregnant woman condemned to death before she gave birth, since the child belonged to its father.

When her time came—after nine months according to the Egyptian solar calendar—the mother gave birth to her child while squatting on the floor, squatting on two bricks, sitting in a confinement chair in her home, or, as was shown on New Kingdom ostraca, in a hut built on the roof of the house or in the garden. She was aided by other women or a midwife. To start her labor, "Lower Egyptian salt" (natron), was used as a laxative. Magical spells concerned with "separating the child from the womb of the mother" or "to speed up the birth" were thought to help. The midwife tried to ease the pains of labor with intoxicating drinks, rinsing the genitals, or applying poultices to the belly. Fumigations used to speed the delivery would have had a psychological effect, rather like the prayers to gods, magic spells, and amulets placed on her body. In the story of the birth of the three children of the sun god—the future kings of the fifth dynasty (known from the Westcar Papyrus)—the goddesses Isis and Nephthys, and the frog-headed goddess of birth Heket helped at the deliveries. They gave each child its name, cut the umbilical cord, washed the child, and placed it on a covered brick; only that story mentions a purification period of fourteen days as well as the birth of the triplets. Little is known about multiple births. The gods Osiris, Horus, Seth, Isis, and Nephthys were born on successive epagomenal days. The only sure source for the birth of twins is the stela of two architects from the eighteenth dynasty, who mention that they came forth from their mother's womb on the same day.

Although the father took part in choosing the name for the child, the mother seems to have been the one who gave it. While still in the womb, the child's lifetime and

fate was decided on by the seven Hathors, by the goddess Meskhenet who helped form the child as the goddess of the birthing bricks (on which the child's fate was inscribed), as well as by Renenutet and other gods and goddesses. The placenta and umbilical cord, mentioned in a few texts, received special treatment. A person's birthday was celebrated. In the Ptolemaic period, if not earlier, it was officially registered.

Death in childbirth was always a threat to women, as well as miscarriage and the death of the infant. Studies on mummies have shown that women had two to four years shorter life expectancy than men, which was due to death in childbirth. Therefore, the Egyptians tried to protect both mother and child with magic spells and charms. Amulets, like the figures of the lion-headed dwarf Bes, whose ugliness fended off all dangerous demons, or the pregnant, hippopotamus goddess, Taweret, with a lion's feet and the back and tail of a crocodile, were worn by both men and women. Curved wands, made from hippopotamus tusk and decorated with apotropaic demons, protected mother and child by analogy to the young sun god Re. In spite of all, infant mortality was very high. To determine whether the child would live or die, a piece of its placenta, called "the mother of the human being" (*mwt rmt*), was mashed with milk and fed to the child. If the child swallowed it, the child would live. According to another test, the child would live if it cried *ny* but would die if it cried *mbi*. Small children could be buried in the house; if a child died with its mother it might be placed with her in her grave, otherwise it got its own grave. Special children's necropolises are known from ancient Egypt.

It is not known if physicians assisted at a child's birth. A late source mentions the training of midwives in the "house of life" in the Nile Delta town of Sais, where physicians also received their training. A child was suckled for as many as three years by its mother or a wetnurse. Mother's milk was kept as medicine in small vessels in the shape of a squatting woman holding a child in her lap. A wetnurse might accompany a child as it developed. Through her milk, a relationship was formed with the child; she could be highly esteemed by her foster child and its family.

Although statuettes of pregnant women are known from prehistoric Egypt, pregnancy is depicted only three times in relief: in the sixth dynasty tomb of Ankhmahor and in the two depictions of the myth of the royal birth, best preserved in the eighteenth dynasty temples of King Amenhotpe III and of Queen Hatshepsut. According to this myth, the god Amun appeared to the queen in the shape of her own husband, to beget the future king or queen. After the builder god Khnum formed the child and its double on the potter's wheel, the queen, aided by god-

desses, gave birth in a confinement chair. The child was recognized by its divine father as his own and pronounced by him as the future ruler. This myth, which proves the divine kingship, is from the New Kingdom. During the Late period and Greco-Roman times, it depicted the birth of the divine child, representing the future king, in a small temple situated adjacent to the temple of the divine triad, the so-called *mammisi*.

[See also Childhood; and Fertility.]

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