

Costanza Gislon Dopfel, ed., *Maternal Materialities: Objects, Rituals and Material Evidence of Medieval and Early Modern Childbirth* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2024). Print, 372 pp., €125.00, ISBN: 9782503605739.



Review

Costanza Gislon Dopfel's edited collection *Maternal Materialities: Objects, Rituals and Material Evidence of Medieval and Early Modern Childbirth* takes a new approach to compiling a collection of articles regarding the history of childbirth. Dopfel's volume is framed through the lens of material culture, aiming to keep 'its attention on the physical object as an indispensable instrument of the birthing process' (p. 19). Dopfel's hope is that a collection centered on materiality will shed new light on the history of childbirth by illuminating not only the traditions and rituals surrounding the process but also the very material objects that made them possible. This collection is composed of six sections, each drawing on a variety of disciplines and presenting multiple objects that are important to the childbirth process throughout medieval and early modern history. Some of these objects appear more than once, demonstrating the fluidity, flexibility and differentiation of their usage throughout various times, cultures and societal frameworks.

Section one is titled 'The Iconography of Birth' and is composed of three articles, each one demonstrating some aspect of not only the visual, but its relationship with the physicality of the birthing experience. Mati Meyer's article

draws attention to the vandalism of Byzantine birthing images and observes that out of images of realistic versus 'painless' deliveries, the ones more likely to be 'barbarized' were those that were realistic, demonstrating a linkage between violence and the female body. The second article by Emilie Bergmann also analyzes images but this time those in a thirteenth-century Spanish manuscript of Marian miracles, focusing on the vividly depicted interactions between secular women and the Virgin Mary regarding experiences with the struggles surrounding pregnancy and childbirth. The final article is by Dopfel and compares the reality of the medieval lying-in room to depictions of women and birth in artistic holy images like the ones discussed in the previous two pieces.

In the second Section, 'Pregnant and Parturient Bodies', Dopfel brings together five articles that focus on the care and perception of the pregnant body as illuminated through both literary materials and objects. Elisa Tosi Brandi begins with a piece discussing the impact that the history of clothing and fashion has on our understanding of how perceptions of pregnancy and childbirth have evolved throughout the ages, analyzing material sources ranging from surviving clothing to inventories. Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli's article centers on the types of food and drink that mothers were provided during pregnancy, drawing her information from texts such as cookbooks, hospital records and medical texts. Dopfel presents the third article in this section which is also about food but focuses on the ritualistic rather than the practical perspective; she centers her analysis on the significance of the vessels

used to present food after childbirth. The fourth essay is by Nina Kremmel, who brings these discussions into the seventeenth century and back to Spain, where her analysis of a text by a Spanish physician highlights its encompassing of care for not only the pregnant woman's body but her mind. The final article moves to Italy and in a joint discussion by Antonella Parmeggiani and Dopfel, an additional area of childbirth history is revealed: the childbirth experiences of Circassian and Tartar slaves in Renaissance Italy and the Venetian colonies.

The place in which the process of childbirth occurs is the topic of section three, 'Inside the Birthing Room' which is composed of three essays that look to contextualize the material objects at work in these intimate physical spaces. Róisín Donohoe's piece illuminates the role of linens in the birthing spaces of late medieval and early modern England, drawing attention to the cyclic effect of how linens that were part of the birthing process could also tragically become the burial clothes of the mother and child. In the second article, Sara Reed draws attention to items utilized by midwives in early modern England and their sources, ownership, and roles in the birthing space and process. The section ends with Alison Klairmont Lingo's article on the material objects in use in birthing rooms of seventeenth-century France, highlighting this period as a time of the introduction of surgeons and surgical instruments to the birthing space.

Section four, 'Childbirth's Ritual Objects' takes the focus beyond the practical utilization of objects and expands to include the symbolic or even magical significance that was often ascribed to them. The section begins by looking at the role of the

emergency baptism procedure in early modern Spanish births in a jointly authored article by Wolfram Aichinger and Alice Dulmovit. It continues in its discussion of Spanish birthing objects in Sabrina Grohsebnner's piece where linens again appear, but this time as symbolic of the role and actions taken by the midwife throughout the birthing process. Fiona Harris-Stoertz moves the conversation back to French and English birthing objects in her essay on the use of saints' clothing during birth to create miracles for pregnant women as they were unable to travel to saint shrines. Finally, Mary Morse analyzes nine English birthing girdles, demonstrating how these girdles were both another method by which to bring saints' miracles to pregnant women during childbirth and a way for the pregnant mother to experience motherhood alongside the Virgin.

In the fifth section, 'Death in Childbirth', three articles focus on the resultant trauma from the deaths of children or mothers during childbirth. Harris-Stoertz opens with a survey of fetal deaths in the High Middle Ages, highlighting the practical, physical and spiritual fears and dangers that expectant mothers and their children would face in childbirth. Mirko Traversari and Giorgio Gruppioni deliver archaeological research in their piece regarding a connection between twin births and emergency baptism in an Italian community, revealing the sobering mortality rate of twin births in this population. The final article by Gaia Gabanini, Elisabetta Cilli, and Traversari is also archaeological and explores the assumption that adult female skeletons buried alongside infants in a seventeenth-century burial spot in the Italian

town of Forlì were mother and child pairings, revealing new perspectives on childbirth culture in this area.

The final section, 'Childbirth and Fertility Rituals across the Millennia: From Prehistory to the Postmodern Era', closes the collection with two essays that bridge ancient and modern conversations. Luigi Canetti's piece traces the history of frog and toad votive images and their relationship with the female body, pregnancy and childbirth from the Neolithic period to the modern age. Svea Vikander concludes this collection by considering the significance of the mother's recovery in the periods after childbirth, framed through an analysis of the literal afterbirth or placenta and its role in both historical and modern childbirth traditions.

In *Maternal Materialities*, Dopfel brings together a wide range of articles that highlight multiple aspects of material culture as it relates to childbirth. The collection is supplemented with vivid images that allow for immersion into the discussed materiality and it excellently pulls together research from areas and cultures that often do not receive as much scholarly attention; several of the articles were translated into English for this volume. Dopfel expands the research field and the diversity of scholars providing materials to this conversation, creating a valuable resource for current and future maternal scholars.

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