

## Childbirth in the Greek Island of Chios in the 6th Century B.C., 1780, and 1914

BY

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I HAVE the honour to bring to the notice of your readers the existence of two Greek terracottas belonging to the 6th century B.C., which are in the museum of Nicosia in Cyprus: a description of a confinement in Chios written in 1780, and a description of the labour chair used in Chios until 1914.

The two Greek terracottas, small votive offerings, are in the Museum at Nicosia in Cyprus (unfortunately I did not take their dimensions when I noticed them in 1930) and both are ascribed to the 6th century B.C. (This dating was given by the Director of the Museum, being based on the chronology of other articles found during the same excavations where these terracottas were unearthed). The one (Plate I) represents a woman being delivered of child in an upright seated position; she is held from the back by another woman, who has her hands clasped round her belly and who is probably pressing the infant downwards exactly as described in *The Expert Midwife* of 1637 and in Sonnini's description written in 1780 (Plate IV); in front and facing her in a kneeling posture is the midwife with her arms outstretched to receive the after-birth. The second terracotta (Plate II) is more coarsely modelled, and may be older; it represents a similar scene except that the seat on which the pregnant woman is reclining is missing and from the angle of the thigh it would appear to have been higher; also there is no trace of a third woman supporting from the back the woman in labour.

Both these votive offerings were presumably presented to the temple in honour of the god presiding over childbirth after suc-

cessful confinements. There do not appear to be any such terracottas in the British Museum or in the Wellcome Museum.

These terracottas establish the fact that in classical times women were delivered in an upright perpendicular position, as is the case in the other relatively recent descriptions which we have now to consider, also that then in all probability some kind of special labour-stool was in use.

Before giving the English translation of Sonnini's account of a confinement in Chios in the year 1780 it is interesting for the sake of comparison to take in its chronological order an account of the use of the labour-stool as given in *The Expert Midwife* published in London in 1637.<sup>1</sup> that is to say roughly a century and a half earlier than the account given by Sonnini. We may conjecture that the same labour-stool was used at that period in England, for otherwise we may presume that the translator would have made a comment on what should have logically appeared to him to be a strange custom. The account reads as follows:

[p. 78] But what the Office of Midwives is in the time of birth, and how the action may proceed, we will now declare. First, let the midwife know the time, and observe the true pains and dolours, also let her comfort and cheare up the labouring woman, and let her chearefully exhort her to obey her Precepts and admonitions. Like wise let her give good exhortations to other women being present, especially to poure forth devout

<sup>1</sup> *The Expert Midwife . . . Six Bookes compiled in Latine by the industry of James Rueff, a learned and expert Chirurgion: and now translated into English for the general good and benefit of this nation.* London, 1637. Lib. 3, Chap. II. pp. 78-83 [of first pagination, which recommences at p. 192].



PLATE I

Method of Delivery in Greece, 8th century B.C.  
Terracotta in museum at Nicosia in Cyprus.

P.A.



PLATE II

Method of Delivery in Greece, 8th century B.C. (?).  
Terracotta in museum at Nicosia in Cyprus.

P.A.



PLATE IV

Method of Delivery of the after-birth in Greek Archipelago  
in 1780 (from Sonnini).

P.A.

prayers to God, afterward to doe their duties at once, as well as they are able. Which done, let her bring the labouring [p. 79] woman to her Stoole, which ought to be prepared in this fashion. [Here follows illustration, see reproduction, Plate III]. Let the Stoole be made compass-wise. underpropped with foure feet, the stay of it behind bending backward, hollow in the midst; covered with a blacke cloth underneath, hanging downe to the ground, by that meanes that the [p. 80] labouring woman may be covered, and other women sometimes apply their hands in any place if necessity require. Let the Stoole be furnished and covered with many cloths and clouts at the back and other parts, that the labouring woman receive no hurt, or the Infant any where, strongly kicking and striving because of the paines, stirrings, and motions of the mother. . And after the labouring woman shall be set in her Chaire

other two by her sides, which may both with good words encourage and comfort the labouring woman, and also may be ready to helpe and put to their hand at any time. This being done, let the Midwife her selfe sit stooping forward before the labouring woman, and let her annoint her owne hands, and the womb of the labouring woman, with oile of Lillies, of sweet Almonds [p. 81], and the grease of an Hen, mingled and tempered together. For to doe this, doth profit and helpe them very much which are grosse and fat, and them, whose secret parts are strict and narrow, and likewise them which have the mouth of the Matrix dry, and such women as are in labour of their first child. It will also be profitable to commixe and temper with those things the white of an Egge. Lastly, all these things thus prepared, let the Midwife instruct and encourage the party to her labour, to abide her paines with patience, and then gently apply her hands to the worke as she ought, by feeling and searching with her fingers how the child lieth, and by relaxing and opening the way and passage conveniently for him, while the mother is in paine, and also where there is need by enlarging and stretching out the neck of the Matrix warily, and if the Infant stay from proceeding forth, and be stopped any where, with her fingers tenderly to direct the Infant to lie and proceed forth directly and naturally, when hee lieth crooked and overthwart, and to further him to an easie birth. Let her conveniently receive the Infant proceeding forth to birth, and let her presently [p. 82] cut the Navell. . . .

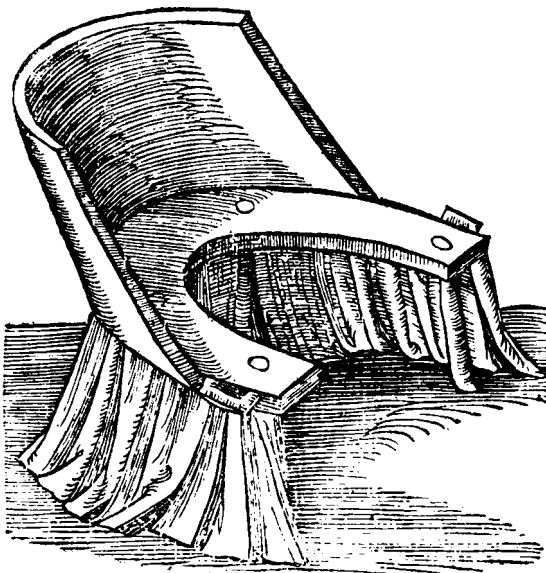


PLATE III

Delivery stool as shown in *The Expert Midwife* (1637).

about to be delivered, the Midwife shall place one woman behind her back which may gently hold the labouring woman, taking her by both her armes, and if need be, the paines waxing grievous, and the woman labouring, may stroke and presse downe the wombe, and may somewhat drive and depress the Infant downward. But let her place

With the above picture in mind we may now pass to the detailed description of a confinement in Chios in the year 1780, when Sonnini visited the island. When reading this extract we should remember that the author was not a doctor, as was the author of *The Expert Midwife*, but an equally educated person who had received a legal training and had subsequently held many administrative posts in the French colonies. He was a man of means, of influence political and other, he had travelled extensively, he possessed a keen power of observation and kept a detailed diary, in which he wrote every day accounts of what

he saw, and which he finally published in book form in 1801.<sup>1</sup>

If one were to examine the Greek of the Archipelago at the most solemn moments of his private life, one would always see him beset with the absurd fantasies of ignorance, doing the most weird things with as much good faith as serious thought. At birth he is surrounded with all the pageantry of superstition, and he remains in its company throughout his life. The attendant circumstances with which he arrives into the world are too curious for me not to make a special mention of them. [Sonnini had obviously not read *The Expert Midwife!*] One has every reason to express surprise that amongst the great number of travellers who have visited the Levant, and especially the islands of the Archipelago, not one of them appears to have been familiar with the methods practised at a confinement and which are certainly most extraordinary and no doubt are not of a character that our [French] women would care to adopt. I had the opportunity to attend a confinement of a young woman and, as I am the first to record it, I will enter into details on the subject that is so all-absorbing for the history of man [See Plate IV].

I should like first of all to mention that the young woman whose confinement I attended was not more than eighteen years old; she was tall, well made, with a strong constitution, and of a beauty that would have made the Greeks of antiquity envious. The preliminary and indicative pains of labour appeared at supper time, the young woman was taken into her bedroom and I had the permission to follow her. The midwife was very old and enjoyed the reputation for great knowledge and experience; she arrived accompanied by an assistant, who was nearly as old as she was herself, but with a less striking appearance and her features not being so regular. An artist wishing to paint a sybil could not have made a better choice for a model; everything about her announced a witch and her replies to questions that I asked could pass on account of their obscurity for pronouncements of an oracle. She also had with her a kind of tripod, of which I soon saw the use, but

which proved to be what I was least expecting; this curious piece of furniture is not made of one piece of solid wood. Two round pieces slightly convex on the outside meet at an acute angle and support at their juncture a flat piece of wood suitable for sitting upon; all round the wood are wrapped and twisted old pieces of linen in not too elegant a fashion and this in turn is held up and rests on three very low legs which are also most coarsely fashioned, one of which supports the small saddle at the angle and the other two are placed under the arms at their extremity. The first care of the midwife was to open the locks of the doors, of the chests, of the trunks, and of everything in the house that had a lock. This was a necessary ritual, if one wanted the delivery to have no complications; and as a corollary of this absurd [p. 82] superstition only married women may be present, the unmarried being strictly excluded. I was also informed that, if I wanted to be present, I must decide to remain in the room until the delivery had been completed. This is a rule that nobody may infringe. Immediately labour begins those who are in the house may not go out and those who are outside may not enter. The former are considered to have contracted a form of taint, which deprives them of all communication with other persons, until a priest, who will have been advised on this score, should have come and blessed them and cleansed them from the impurity that they imagine they have contracted.

However, nature began to act; the efforts she provokes to hasten the birth of a new being multiply and the period of time between the labour pains lessens; everything indicates an easy labour and a happy confinement. During the course of this psychological action of the child on its mother she does not remain inactive; she was being urged to walk ceaselessly up and down in her room; if the pain or lassitude or despair should cause her to desire to rest for a moment, the two old cronies supported [p. 83] her under the arms and forced her to walk; and it must be admitted that she appeared to have no desire to walk. As soon as the great labour pains made themselves felt, she was made to bend and to double up in front of her bed and the midwife took up her position behind her and pressed her belly hard with both hands until the pain had passed, and this did not take long; then the walking recommenced, until a recur-

<sup>1</sup> C. N. Sonnini de Manoncourt, *Voyage en Grèce et Turquie fait par ordre de Louis XVI.* A. Paris, An IX [= 1801].

rence of the pains brought the woman to need further pressure on her belly from the midwife. . . .

[p. 92] During the time when I was in the room of the young Greek woman in labour, I asked the old midwife various questions on her profession; I asked, for example, what she did in cases when the child was badly placed. She assured me that such an eventuality hardly ever presented itself, but, when it did, she tried to turn the baby into its proper position and that, were she not to succeed, she had recourse to a method which always extricated her from the difficulty [p. 93]: that was to call the husband, who in the opinion of the women of this country possesses in particular the power to remove all obstacles that oppose themselves to the delivery of his wife; and this magic power consists in the husband striking his wife thrice on the back with his shoe and at the same time pronouncing the words "I loaded you, now I discharge you."

When the critical moment arrives, the young woman is placed on the fateful tripod; in the description that I gave of this sort of seat, I indicated the position of the woman; an air of frankness and uneasiness made her appearance most interesting, and her features—a delicate outline of youth and beauty—did not seem changed by the pains. The midwife took up her position in front of the patient at a slightly lower level and her assistant sitting behind on a chair rather higher than the labour-stool placed her arms round her waist.

The child was not long before making its appearance; and as soon as it was separated from the afterbirth, the assistant by a vigorous movement of the arms lifted and bumped the patient up and down perpendicularly over the tripod and let her drop again on to it with a jerk. I [p. 94] could not get over my amazement to see this woman, who had just been delivered of child, being subjected to a manipulation that appeared to me as absurd as it was revolting; she was thus remorselessly shaken until her delivery was complete, and fortunately this did not take long. This violent procedure is a common practice and Greek women consider it to be indispensable to complete the delivery; and accidents very seldom result, although one might think that many would be occasioned. . . .

[p. 95] I was surprised to see that the patient in no way complained and after the experience,

that had appeared so cruel, walked unattended to her bed with absolute ease without showing signs of weakness or fatigue. A few moments of rest enabled her to appear in an unhopd for condition; the colour in her cheeks was a little less marked, but she was still rosy; with geniality she received a host of congratulations and she replied as if she were in a most placid condition.

I should like to follow up with the treatment which is applied to women after their confinement; it is the following: Immediately after the delivery the woman is bound with a wide linen bandage from the breasts to the kidneys [*depuis le sein jusqu'aux reins*, i.e. from just below the breasts to the top of the pelvic bones]; the bandage is applied tightly. Here in Europe our practise decries such a treatment and disapproves of a bandage. "Any outside pressure on the belly of a woman delivered of child is very dangerous owing to the inclination of the [p. 96] abdominal cavity to inflammation. The weight of a child during nine months of pregnancy, the successive contractions of the womb, whence the violent labour pains of childbirth, irritate this viscus and inflame it; any pressure in consequence can but be fatal to the woman in childbirth." [Extract from a letter from a famous doctor of the period, Sacombe, to the author Sonnini]. No doubt a learned theory has revealed the inconveniences of this method; but for the Greek women they are but chimera of fancy; for they withstand with as much impunity the pressure of the bandage with which they are bound as they do when they face the dangers of the jolting on the labour-chair. On the contrary they are conscious of the advantage, namely that they thus preserve their good figures, which a multitude of women in other countries might easily envy. It is to avoid the usual excessive swelling of the belly or, what is still more disagreeable, the numerous folds and the furrows of deep wrinkles.

On the first day the midwife bandages the patient after having applied dried rose leaves, which previously she boils in wine and honey. After many ablutions of this mixture the rose leaves themselves are applied until the following day. On the [p. 97] second day and the days following they confine themselves to simple fomenting, applied with cotton soaked in hot wine and then are applied alternatively powder of cinnamon,

clove, nutmeg, or cumin; let it be understood that only one of these aromatic powders is applied at a time and that each time the bandage is changed.

Instead of wine, which they use only in cases of delicate women, they usually employ brandy, which makes the application burn more and is more painful. Whatever may be the condition of the patient, whether her recovery is in advance of the usual or whether it is retarded, the same method of bandaging is continued, morning and evening. It is interesting to note that at each of these bandagings the midwife gets on to the bed of the woman she is attending, lying in the opposite way with her head resting on the foot of the bed and with her legs stretched between those of the patient, and clasps the patient's hands in hers and with one foot she jolts violently three times the parts that have suffered, pressing her foot upon them as hard as she can.

On the eighth day they hard-boil an egg, remove its shell, sprinkle it with some aromatic herb powder, and fasten it with bandages on the place where the midwife pressed her foot; it is left in that position for two to three hours. The object of this procedure, according to what the midwife seriously informed me, is to attract any cold that the patient might have contracted; this is the last attention of the midwife, after which she leaves the case.

[p. 98] The linen that has been used at a confinement must not [p. 99] be washed in sea water, although the inhabitants of the Archipelago use little else for laundering; they are persuaded that, were they not to deviate from their custom, the mother would die. She must also not be seen by any star; and if she goes out four or five days after childbirth, which is customary, that is to say before her treatment is ended [treatment is continued until the eighth day, see above, Sonnini p. 97], she must be careful to shut herself up in her room at sunset and under no pretext whatsoever must she open either door or window in case a star surprise her and according to their superstition spell death to both mother and child.

The first time a woman leaves her bed after giving birth to a child, and places her feet on the ground, she must step on a piece of iron, so that according to the superstition she may become as strong as this metal. Also she may enter no house without throwing on to the threshold a key or some

other pieces of iron, on which she must necessarily tread, if she wishes [p. 100] to avoid introducing the baleful influences with which she is considered to be surrounded.

[p. 100] As soon as a child is born it is washed with tepid water; it is then covered from the feet as far as the neck with a layer of salt, which is regarded as a sure preventative against worms and skin diseases. After having wrapped it in swaddling clothes, it is laid down and a loaf of bread and a pestal or some other kind of fashioned wood is placed beside it: the loaf is to prevent the child suffering from hunger throughout its life and the effect of the pestal is to make it as quiet as a piece of wood. In other parts of the Levant the mother holds her new-born and the midwife takes a bronze mortar and bangs it fairly hard three times near the ear of the child, in order, so they maintain, to open its acoustic organ and to make it immune against deafness.

From what Sonnini writes we may definitely deduce that at the close of the 18th century the labour-chair was no longer in use in France. Finally is added an illustration (Plate V) of the labour-chair which was in use in Chios until about 1914.

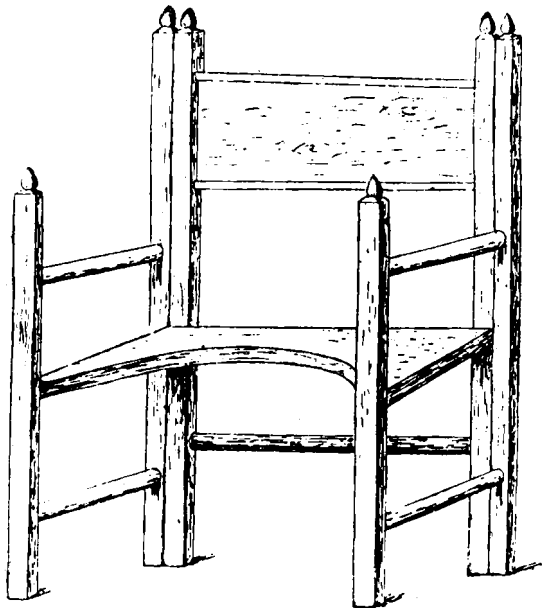


PLATE V

Delivery stool in use in Chios up to 1914.



It will be noticed that it was higher than the tripod represented by Sonnini and has a back in accordance with the ideas expressed in *The Expert Midwife*, but instead of being concave to fit the curvature of the body it is straight like an ordinary chair.

In Chios doctors only took over, so to speak, from midwives about 1914. I have been given there the following information by an old woman who had practised midwifery in the island for many years before retiring.

As there were no means of communicating in Chios except for a few inferior roads, the midwife went on her round on mule-back generally accompanied by an assistant, who for choice would be her daughter and successor-elect to her practice; on one side of the mule was strapped the labour-chair, which folded up, having heavy hinges behind the seat and at the junctures of the arms and back. For padding, shaped cushions were tied to the

different parts of the chair. The pregnant woman was seated in the chair and, in order to bring on the child, was jolted up and down from the back by the assistant, who held her under the arms; if the woman was heavy then the jolting was carried out by one of the women members of the family who helped by holding the woman under the left arm with her right hand and the midwife's assistant doing likewise on the right side with her left hand, thus leaving the right arm of the more experienced free for pressing down the belly of the expectant mother. The midwife's position was exactly similar to that of the one represented in the terracottas dating from 600 B.C. The midwife's after-treatment continued for 8 days after which the mother was considered to be in a condition to resume her normal life.

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In captions under Plates I and II "8th century B.C." should read "6th century B.C."