

## Conclusions

Mothers are women, of course, because a mother is a female parent, and a female who is a parent must be an adult, hence must be a woman.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, fathers are male parents, are men. But we mean something different when we say that someone mothered a child than when we say that someone fathered her or him. We can talk about a man "mothering" a child, if he is this child's primary nurturing figure, or is acting in a nurturant manner. But we would never talk about a woman "fathering" a child. . . . In these cases we call her the child's social father, and do not say that she fathered her child. Being a mother, then, is not only bearing a child – it is being a person who socializes and nurtures. It is being a primary parent or caretaker. So we can ask, why are mothers women? Why is the person who routinely does all those activities that go into parenting not a man?

Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, p. 11

For thousands of years, only women had babies. Primitive women would go off into primitive huts and groan and wail and sweat while other women hovered around. The primitive men stayed outside doing manly things, such as lifting heavy objects and spitting. . . . If you had suggested to primitive men that they should actually watch women have babies, they would have laughed at you and probably tortured you for three or four days. They were real men.

Dave Barry, "Father Faces Life," p. 6

<sup>1</sup> I have now met enough girls from age 12 to 14 who have had *at least* one full-term pregnancy that this line just makes me want to laugh and cry at the same time.

### Rare, Uncommon, Atypical

As stated at the beginning of this work, the kourotrophic image – the depiction of woman and child (much less man and child!) – is far less common in Bronze Age iconographies than the biological realities might lead one to expect. The motif is at its most prolific in Egypt, which has the longest and most varied tradition, extending, some might argue, into the present day. The kourotrophic tradition here includes the Divine Wet Nurse, queens, a single king, royal tutors and nurses, wall paintings and ostraca, figurines, and flasks. The types depict actual mothers, a single father, wet nurses both mortal and divine, male caretakers, and utterly anonymous milk containers. Several kourotrophoi are of historically attested, named individuals; many others are not; many appear to be purely ideological. In short, Egypt had a full complement of kourotrophic iconography.

No other region of the Bronze Age Near East or Mediterranean had such a proliferation of the woman (much less man!) and child motif. Anatolia had a small but varied and continuous tradition of kourotrophic iconography, with its main manifestation being the indigenous lead plaques that portrayed, among other motifs, the divine family. Random bronze or alabaster figurines also manifested this tradition, as did the tiny gold pendent with what may have been the Sun Goddess of Arinna with a child. Cyprus had a robust tradition of what might be dubbed maternal iconography, ranging from the birthing amulets of the Chalcolithic through the plank and bird-faced figurine kourotrophoi of the Bronze Age to the Phoenician *dea grvida* to the pregnant, birthing, and kourotrophic terracottas of the Archaic Age. Mesopotamia produced a literal handful of seals and a number of terracotta plaques, whereas Mycenaean Greece had a small subset of female terracotta figurines that held one or (rarely) two children. These areas – Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Cyprus, and Greece – had an indigenous tradition of kourotrophism, meaning that the current evidence suggests that the motif arose independently in these areas (although, as with Anatolia and Greece, later external influences did come to augment the internal traditions).

Other regions of the Near East only had kourotrophic iconography by proxy. That is, the motif only appeared in their imagery through considerable contact with one of the indigenously producing cultures. The kourotrophos only appears in the Levant because of extensive contact with Egypt, especially in Palestine, where the handful of

kourotrophic potency figurines emerged in regions under Egyptian colonization. The Iranian kourotrophoi engaged in cross-fertilization with the Mesopotamian plaques, so that, as noted in Chap. 4, many scholars attempt to identify the goddess portrayed as a Mesopotamian rather than an Elamite goddess. As the preceding chapters have made clear, the kourotrophos, in any manifestation, never becomes popular or prominent in any of these "proxy" regions.

Some areas were wholly immune to kourotrophism. The closest Minoan Crete ever comes to producing a kourotrophos is the tiny, Egyptian(izing) Divine Wet Nurse plaque from Monastiraki. Considering the extensive contacts with Egypt, Cyprus, and Mycenaean Greece attested in the Minoan archaeological record, and the presence of other "maternal" iconography in Crete (Gravidenflasche), the absence of kourotrophic iconography on this island appears to be an active rejection rather than an oversight.

Not only was the kourotrophos motif relatively rare in all areas of consideration save Egypt, it was also atypical. That is to say, the kourotrophos was a variation in a larger body of imagery that did not make use of kourotrophism. Kourotrophic potency figurines, even in Egypt, were never as common as the non-kourotrophic variants. The kourotrophic divine family motifs were only a tiny subset of the vast array of Anatolian lead plaques. The Mesopotamian birth goddess was an extreme rarity in Mesopotamian glyptic, and the kourotrophic plaques were, once again, merely a small subsection of the far more common "Nude Female" plaques of the Old Babylonian period. Cypriot plank figurines were more common without baby or basket. Non-kourotrophic bird-faced figurines were more popular than kourotrophic, and the normal-faced figurines were, with one exception, wholly non-kourotrophic. There were considerably more non-kourotrophic *phi*, *psi*, and *tau* figurines than kourotrophic, and they were far more widespread.

Finally, it is worth considering how few kourotrophoi in the iconographic record were intended to portray *people*. The Divine Wet Nurse motif, both in Egypt and in Syria, depicts, inevitably, a goddess, as do the lead plaques and gold pendant from Anatolia, half the kourotrophoi in the Mesopotamian glyptic, the terracotta plaques of Ninhursag, the early terracotta plaques from Elam, and, as I argue, both the Late Cypriot bird-faced figurines and at least some of the Mycenaean terracotta figurines. In these instances, the kourotrophic element serves primarily as an identifier of a specific goddess, be she Nintu or Ninhursag, Narundi or Hepat, "Kypris" or "Aphaia." As such, the kourotrophism

serves more to identify a deity than it might to make any statements about the role of kourotrophism in the persona of the deity portrayed, or in the culture in general.

On the flip side are the plaques from Egypt, Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Iran that serve magical functions. Although at least part of the magical effect is in the portrayal of an apparently mortal female with child, that mortal female is anonymous, a theoretical portrayal of a desired effect. Her generic nature is required so that the user of the item, if desired, could cast a more specific identity onto the magical item. Even more generic were the Egyptian flasks, whose kourotrophic imagery simply means "got milk."

What remains might be understood as individuals. Several, of course, exist in Egypt, ranging from named queens and wet nurses and royal tutors to more humble women portrayed with their children in figurines and tomb paintings and on the walls of their own houses and prefigured on the ostraca. Mothers and caretakers are well represented in Egypt. A few, probably mothers, exist from Mesopotamia, although it is not possible to make the argument that kourotrophic *wet nurses* exist, based on the negative evidence from Urkeš. If we might understand the kourotrophic Cypriot plank figurines to be mortal (which I believe they are), then these too depict mortal mothers/caretakers, just as the non-kourotrophic variants portray mortal women at other points in the female life cycle. Their personal identities are expressed, probably, in the unique designs that cover the bodies and faces of these images.

Kourotrophoi are relatively rare. So much for the "eternal theme" of "mother and child."

### The Ambiguity of Status

The question emerges as to why a reality that was so prolific in the ancient world was so uncommon in the iconography. Part of the issue, I believe, comes down to the ambivalence that existed between maternity-as-child-care and social status.

### *Connective Tissue*

A very prominent use of the kourotrophos is to show connections, literally embodied connections, between members of high-status groups. The kings of Egypt showed themselves seated upon the laps and/or

suckling from the breasts of goddesses. Royal nurses and tutors of the Eighteenth Dynasty had themselves portrayed with their tiny charges, who were inevitably high-ranking members of the royal family, in some cases (as with Sitre) a "child" who had become Pharaoh. Queens such as Ankhnes-Meryre were shown supporting the diminutive king, while themselves serving as a throne and thus iconographically linking themselves to Isis. As with Ankhnes-Meryre in Egypt, so too with Queen Uqnitum of Urkeš, who established herself as official royal consort and queen mother through her close connection, portrayed graphically, to her royal children.

An important function of the kourotrophic motif, then, was the prominent display of connection, a connection that established or emphasized one person's status by way of another's. What is of interest is the directional nature of this dynamic. Concerning the Egyptian Divine Wet Nurse motif (the Syrian version is too rare and ambiguous for extended analysis), the direction of status acquisition goes from goddess to king, from the kourotrophos to the child. This is inevitable in this instance, because the kourotrophos, whoever she is, is consistently a divinity, who will always "outrank" a human, even the king. The use of the Divine Wet Nurse motif is a piece of royal propaganda that places the king in the company of the deities and shows him (or her, in the case of Hatshepsut) as the recipient and beneficiary of their good will and bounty. The king received status through his connection to the nursing goddess, even if he was depicted as the junior partner.

In contrast, in the mortal realm, the flow of status is reversed. For the queen, the tutor, the nurse, status derives from being shown in intimate contact with the member of the royal family: the king, king-to-be, or high-ranking child of the king. For the nonroyal nurses and tutors, to be allowed to depict oneself in such a relation with royalty exalts the position of the kourotrophos by connecting her or him with a (much) higher level of social status. The kourotrophos is outranked by the child, but the child is of such social elevation that this is far less relevant than the ability of the kourotrophos to be seen in intimacy with the child. For the queen, the close connection between the mother and child reaffirms the mother's status of primary consort and, importantly, queen mother, a contestable rank in societies where polygyny was practiced among royalty. In the case of queens, the child need not fully outrank the kourotrophos, but the high status of the child reaffirms the status of the kourotrophos.

In every instance where the child or the kourotophos could derive status from the kourotophic relationship, names appear: Ankhnes-Meryre, Seti I, Senenmut, Sitre, Uqnitum, Zamena possibly even Sobeknakht, the various kings with their various nursing goddesses. The clear identification of the partners in the relationship had to be expressed for the proper acquisition of status.

*"I'm Not Just a Mom . . ."*

However, most people are functionally anonymous commoners. Remarkably few people had access to such high-ranking persons, not to mention deities, so it is not to be wondered at that the kourotophos's ability to form high-status connections did not function the same way for the majority of the populace, those people below the rank of royalty, *hoi polloi*. Furthermore, as discussed in Chaps. 4–6, maternal identity itself did not serve as a status marker in many parts of the ancient world. Although maternity does appear, quite vividly, to have been celebrated in Egypt, with kourotophoi decorating the front rooms of homes, funerary arts, and personal items, this "celebration" did not carry over into Mesopotamia, nor was it necessarily so high-ranking in Cyprus. Although a scant handful of Mesopotamian seals or sealings show scenes of people with mother *goddesses* (always a sign of status), or, even rarer, anonymous scenes of mortal woman and child, the full corpus of women in art and art dedicated by women as studied by Julia Asher-Greve shows that the maternal relationship was the one least likely to be advertised by the women involved.<sup>2</sup> Status was derived from paternal lineage and/or husband and/or profession, especially as priestess or court functionary. There was no point to portraying the mother–child relationship because there was no status to be derived from such a portrayal. One could love one's kids at home; the relationship was mostly pointless in the public sphere.

Although our data from Cyprus are nontextual, analyses of the Bronze Age iconography seem to argue for a similar lack of high maternal status. Edgar Peltenburg's study of the Vounous Bowl strongly suggests that the sole female of the composition, the kourotophos, ranked at the same level statuswise as the animals in their pens.<sup>3</sup> In the Late Bronze Age, there is a correlation between the status of figurine

<sup>2</sup> Asher-Greve 2006: 49.

<sup>3</sup> Peltenburg 1994: 160.

type as established by Patrick Begg and the propensity of that figurine type to display kourotrophic iconography. For Begg, the most common, meaning nonélite, type of figurine of the LBA was the bird-faced figurine, which had a kourotrophic manifestation.<sup>4</sup> The newer, thus more exotic, thus more élite normal-faced figurines were never (with one exception) kourotrophic. The final manifestation of the development of the Nude Female image in Bronze Age Cyprus was the bronze statuette of the Bomford type. These are never, with no exceptions, kourotrophic. Likewise, the Aegean-style *phi*, *psi*, and *tau* figurines from Cyprus appeared in higher-status contexts, and they, too, were never kourotrophic.<sup>5</sup>

A similar dynamic appears in the Linear B corpora of Mycenaean Greece and Crete. Maternal lineage, like paternal, appears occasionally amongst the upper echelons of society, but only in those instances where sacerdotal function was inherited along family lines.<sup>6</sup> Patronymics were common at the highest levels of society, noted especially among the royal "followers."<sup>7</sup> There was thus a consistently close link between paternity and status. In contrast, references to mother-child groupings only appeared consistently among the lower-status members of society: the industrial weavers. Even when boys were transferred to the men's work groups, there was no reference to paternity. Although we have no documentation from domestic contexts, the palatial records indicate that the woman-child bond was relevant mainly among laborers. It is perhaps not to be wondered at, then, that kourotrophic figurines, even in their humble medium, were not especially popular.

Of particular interest is the utter absence, the active rejection, of kourotrophic iconography in Minoan Crete. Although myths of Crete's "matriarchy" have been wholly disavowed, there continues to be evidence that women did possess relatively high status in Crete vis-à-vis male status (considering matters of sex in the absence of mediating factors such as class, etc.). This would almost suggest that there is an inverse relationship between kourotrophism and female status, that the higher women's status in society, the less likely they are to be portrayed as mothers/caretakers.

To be a goddess has status. To be a queen has status. To be a caretaker of a prince or princess has status. In all these examples the kourotrophos

<sup>4</sup> Begg 1991: 53.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*: 43.

<sup>6</sup> Carlier 1999: 186.

<sup>7</sup> Shelmerdine 2008: 131; Carlier 1999: 192.

serves to identify the individuals involved and to manifest power(ful) relationships. To be a mom, outside of Egypt at any rate, apparently did not have status; it might have even implied the opposite.

## The Matter of Gender

### *100% Woman*

The above hypothesis concerning status serves as a rather interesting segue into the next issue for consideration, which is the relationship between the kourotophos and ancient constructions of gender. As discussed in Chap. 1, modern archaeological theorists are currently reconsidering (modern understandings of) the construction of gender in the ancient world. Of particular interest is whether or not ancient gender, or, for that matter, ancient conceptions of sex, might be understood in dualist form. In contrast to the modern (also contested!) notion of male and female (sex) and thus masculine and feminine (gender), theorists such as Kathleen McCaffrey and Lauren Talalay among others have argued that the ancients had a fuller range of sexed identities, including androgynous or unsexed. With a fuller range of sexes comes a fuller range of genders, which also do not necessarily line up in a one-to-one system. In short, modern conceptions of male and female do not necessarily reflect ancient conceptions, nor should they be inflicted on our reconstructions of the past.

In spite of this tendency to ungender archaeology, it cannot be denied that the ancient kourotophos has gender, and that gender is female. This is evident in the almost exclusive female sex of the kourotophoi in the archaeological record. The only exceptions, once again, are the handful of Eighteenth-Dynasty royal tutors and the few depictions of Akhnaten shown holding the royal children. As noted above, such depictions are of named, historically documented individuals who, except Akhnaten, achieved high status through their intimate connections with the royal family. All other depictions of kourotophoi, including 100% of the deities, common people, and magic/ideological examples, are females. To put this another way, 100% of the conceptual kourotophoi, the ones who reflect not reality but socially constructed notions of reality, are female. Ancient peoples thought of kourotophoi as female.

As a motif that accrues exclusively to one sex but not the other, we must accept that the kourotophos is an engendered image. This is especially so in light of the fact that although women were probably



the primary caregivers of infants in the ancient world, they were most certainly not exclusively so, nor did they have to be. As discussed at length by scholars such as Nancy Chodorow and Kathleen Bolen, there is no reason past parturition for women to be the exclusive caregivers for children. Fathers, grandparents, older siblings, and members of the more extended family can, did, and still do contribute to the rearing of small children. Nevertheless, they are not shown acting in these capacities. The exclusive female sex of the *kourotrophos* is at least partially ideological, but that ideology is wholly consistent. 100% of the time, people happen to conceive of children's caretakers as female. By extension, child care itself is gendered female, regardless of historical (or contemporary) practical realities.

So, no matter what other sexes or genders we might find in antiquity, it cannot be denied that woman/female exists, and that she is associated with child care to the exclusion of any other sex or gender. In some ways, then, ancient female gender is not so far off from our own. This does not mean that all females were *kourotrophic* caregivers, of course, especially in light of the relative paucity of *kourotrophic* iconography. It simply means that all *kourotrophic* caregivers, and child care giving itself, were understood to be female/feminine.

### *The Problems of Fatherhood*

So where are the men? Why, with the exception of Eighteenth-Dynasty Egypt, are there no men in antiquity who chose to show themselves caring even for their own children? Men might be depicted in artistic compositions with (their) children, as on wall paintings and statues from Egypt, or lead plaques from Anatolia, or scenic compositions from Cyprus, or frescoes from Akrotiri. But they never appear holding those children, or displaying anything that might be termed affection for them. The inability to lactate cannot be blamed for this omission, as many of female *kourotrophoi* do not nurse, merely hold. Furthermore, Egypt, that bastion of *kourotrophic* iconography, has literary testimony of male deities nursing the (dead) king in the Pyramid Texts. Nevertheless, unlike the female examples, these images were never rendered iconographically.<sup>8</sup> The *kourotrophos* not only is engendered female, it also quite pointedly is not male (or neuter, hermaphroditic, or even all that ambiguous, really).

<sup>8</sup> Whereas the Egyptians had no qualms about portraying trees or snakes as *kourotrophic*.

This stands in contrast to the importance of offspring to men in antiquity. Some of our earliest literatures emphasize the significance of (multiple) children, preferably sons, to men's social standing and after-life experience. The Eighteenth-Dynasty "Instruction of Any" begins with the importance of progeny (3.1-4):

Take a wife while you're young,  
That she make a son for you;  
She should bear for you while you're youthful,  
It is proper to make people.  
Happy the man whose people are many,  
He is saluted on account of his progeny.<sup>9</sup>

The importance of multiple sons is emphasized in the Sumerian tale of "Bilgames and the Netherworld" (ll. 255-269):

"Did you see the man with one son?" "I saw him." "How does he fare?"  
"For the peg built into his wall bitterly he laments."  
"Did you see the man with two sons?" "I saw him." "How does he fare?"  
"Seated on two bricks he eats a bread-loaf."  
"Did you see the man with three sons?" "I saw him." "How does he fare?"  
"He drinks water from the waterskin slung on the saddle."  
"Did you see the man with four sons?" "I saw him." "How does he fare?"  
"Like a man with a team of four donkeys his heart rejoices."  
"Did you see the man with five sons?" "I saw him." "How does he fare?"  
"Like a fine scribe with a nimble hand he enters the palace with ease."  
"Did you see the man with six sons?" "I saw him." "How does he fare?"  
"Like a man with ploughs in harness his heart rejoices."  
"Did you see the man with seven sons?" "I saw him." "How does he fare?"  
"Among the junior deities he sits on a throne and listens to the proceedings."  
"Did you see the man with no heir?" "I saw him." "How does he fare?"  
"He eats a bread-loaf like a kiln-fired brick."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Trans. Lichtheim 2003: 111.

<sup>10</sup> Trans. George 1999: 187-188. "Bilgames" is a Sumerian variant of the name "Gilgameš."

Or we may simply listen to the anguished cry of King Kirta of Ugarit (Column II, 1–5):

What to me is silver, or even yellow gold,  
 Together with its land, and slaves forever mine?  
 A triad of chariot horses  
 From the stable of a slavewoman's son?  
 Let me procreate sons!  
 Let me produce a brood!<sup>11</sup>

Although reality may have had some role to play in the exclusive engendering of the *kourotrophos* (women being the primary though not exclusive caregivers), other ideas come to the fore. First is the matter of status, as discussed above. As the evidence suggests, very few women acquired status via maternity. In a similar vein, it is likely that, although men acquired status from *having* children, there was little prestige in the quotidian tasks of actually rearing children. Quite to the contrary, both Chodorow and Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo have argued that fathers specifically derive status from their *lack* of participation in the domestic (and thus child-rearing) context. Noting several techniques used by men artificially to distance themselves from their families, such as separate sleeping quarters or even veiling (including the ever popular American newspaper veil), Rosaldo concluded,

Such rituals enforce the distance between men and their families; for the individual, they provide a barrier to becoming embedded in an intimate, demanding world. Distance permits men to manipulate their social environment, to stand apart from intimate interaction, and, accordingly, to control it as they wish. Because men can be separate, they can be "sacred"; and by avoiding certain sorts of intimacy and unmediated involvement, they can develop an image and mantle of integrity and worth.<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, Chodorow noted the cause and effect relationship between men's absence, mothers' incessant presence, the socialization of boys, and the valorization of masculinity generally:

Masculinity is presented to a boy as less available and accessible than femininity, as represented by his mother. A boy's mother is his primary caretaker. At the same time, masculinity is idealized or accorded superiority, and thereby becomes even more desirable. Although fathers are not as salient as mothers in daily

<sup>11</sup> Trans. Parker 1997: 13–14.

<sup>12</sup> Rosaldo 1974: 27.

interaction, mothers and children often idealize them and give them ideological primacy, precisely because of their absence and seeming inaccessibility. . . .<sup>13</sup>

To be portrayed in the general context of children and family life, as we do see men in the ancient art, sufficiently conveys the notion of progeny. The kouroutrophic motif, by contrast, displays an extensive involvement in the more grueling and even demeaning aspects of daily child care, those tasks worthy of gratitude but seldom rushed into with glee.

Double the food your mother gave you,  
Support her as she supported you;  
She had a heavy load in you,  
But she did not abandon you.  
When you were born after your months,  
She was yet yoked <to you>,  
Her breast in your mouth for three years.  
As you grew and your excrement disgusted,  
She was not disgusted, saying: "What shall I do!"  
She sent you to school,  
And you were taught to write,  
She kept watching over you daily,  
With bread and beer in her house.

("Instruction of Any," 7.17-8.1)<sup>14</sup>

Or, as noted in a Sumerian Proverb (2.141), "A mother who has given birth to eight youths lies down in weakness."<sup>15</sup>

### *Whose Baby?*

*"You stupid bunnies! You got no mates! Where are mates? Where are chicks? Plenty trouble for you. You need mates! You got no brains – you got no plan – you need mates for plan. Listen! I got plan for you. Wing better. I go fly. Fly for you. I find mates."*  
("Watership Down," movie version, 1978)

There is, of course, a certain irony in the father-child relationship. As stated above, men needed children. Furthermore, as discussed in Chap. 1, there is much ancient evidence to suggest that in many parts of the ancient world for which we have writings on the topic, it was

<sup>13</sup> Chodorow 1978: 181.

<sup>14</sup> Trans. Lichtheim 2003: 113.

<sup>15</sup> Trans. Alster 1997: 72.

believed that males were the founts of fertility, impregnating women with complete embryos. As such, females did not contribute to what we might call the genetic makeup of a child. Children were understood to derive from and belong to their fathers, evident in practices ranging in complexity from elaborate inheritance laws to the simple use of patronymics.

However, in order to *get* a child, men need women, a female body, at every possible step. As the first quotation from the "Instruction of Any" above shows, the necessary first step in getting a child was getting a woman/wife. "Take a wife while you're young, that she make a son for you" says the father to his son. Likewise, King Kirta of Ugarit, to acquire the desired brood, must raise an army and travel to Udum so that he might demand (Col. VI, 22–28 and 33–35),

What is not in my house you must give me:  
You must give me Lady Huraya,  
The Fair One, your firstborn child!  
Who's as fair as the goddess Anath,  
Who's as comely as Astarte . . .  
Who will bear a child for Kirta,  
A lad for the Servant of El.<sup>16</sup>

According to an ancient Sumerian proverb (1.146),

Marry a wife according to your choice!  
Have children to your heart's desire!<sup>17</sup>

Or, if you're really lucky (1.147),

May Inanna make a hot-limbed wife lie by you!  
May she bestow upon you broad-armed sons!  
May she seek out for you a place of happiness!<sup>18</sup>

Or, quite simply (1.160),

Marrying is human.  
Getting children is divine.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Trans. Parker 1997: 23. On the need of fathers for offspring in Levantine literature generally, Saul Olyan noted (2010: 60), "I would add that given the common literary topos of the childless patriarch or king petitioning his patron deity for progeny, as in the Kirta and Aqhat epics from Ugarit and Genesis 15, not to mention the patrilinear nature of Israelite society and the consequent importance of a man producing an heir, we should assume a husband's active concern for his wife's ability to conceive a child, carry it to term, and bear it successfully, as well as her capacity to lactate so that the child can be nourished."

<sup>17</sup> Trans. Alster 1997: 29.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*: 30.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*: 33.

In the second version of the Anatolian *Tale of Illuyanka*, the Storm God, needing revenge on the Serpent (§22, A iii 4–5), “took as his wife the daughter of a poor man and sired a son.”<sup>20</sup> A Middle Hittite incantation against impotence (more on this below) beseeches the goddess Uliliyassi (l. 14), “Let him take his wife, let him produce for himself children! Let him produce for himself sons and daughters!”<sup>21</sup> In his *Theogony* Hesiod the misogynist actually complains rather bitterly about this fact of reproduction (ll. 603–7):

[W]hoever escapes marriage and women’s harm,  
By refusing to marry, comes to deadly old age  
With no son to tend him; not lacking livelihood  
While he lives, when he dies distant kin divide  
His estate.<sup>22</sup>

An interesting contrast emerges in the Mesopotamian tale of Etana. This king is without child or possibly without son, as the main concern in the story seems to be about an heir specifically:

(Etana prays to Shamash for an heir.)  
“[ . . . ], open what is hidden.  
Take away my disgrace, give me an heir!”  
Etana lay down to see (a dream),  
He had a dream in bed at night.  
“ . . . go on the road, cross the highlands.  
As you traverse the [mou]ntains,  
[Loo]k for a pit, approach near to it,  
He will give you the plant of birth.”<sup>23</sup>

In order to have a child, the king prays to Shamash, who tells him to go get a mutilated eagle out of a pit so they can fly off in search of the plant of birth/life. No extant version of the tale has the ending, so it is impossible to know how well this technique worked out for him. Personally, I get the feeling Etana might have been better off with a woman. (“*You stupid monarch! You got no mate!*”)<sup>24</sup>

Upon acquisition of a woman, the male must then have sex with her in order to impregnate her and thus “give” her the child. For the male to become sexually potent, he must, at least according to our evidence

<sup>20</sup> Trans. Hoffner 1998: 13.

<sup>21</sup> Trans. Hoffner 1987: 279.

<sup>22</sup> Trans. Caldwell 1987: 63.

<sup>23</sup> Trans. Foster 1993: 445.

<sup>24</sup> It is possible that Etana did have a wife, and that his purpose in finding the Plant of Life was to give it to her. However, none of the extant versions of this story mention this.

from Egypt, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia,<sup>25</sup> be stimulated by a female. One of the most long-standing icons from Syro-Mesopotamia is the nude, so-called squatting woman, who first appears at Çatal Hüyük and whose use continues into the Iron Age.<sup>26</sup> The image appears frequently in compositions accompanied by images of human sexual intercourse, occasionally partaking of sexual intercourse herself (the penis being clearly visible inside of her). The image of the eroticized female is thus closely linked to human sexual intercourse.<sup>27</sup> There is no male equivalent.

The female role in exciting male heterosexual desire comes across strongly in the Mesopotamian incantation texts, especially when it comes to painful, unwanted arousal ("lovesickness"), or, conversely, as a cure for impotence. According to a first-millennium Sumerian incantation to cure lovesickness:

The "nice girl" is standing in the street,  
the girl, KAR-KID of Inanna was present in the tavern.  
....  
She has hung her hair down towards him, the hair causing arousal,  
She has stretched her hand out towards him, the hand causing  
arousal,  
She has extended her foot out towards him, the foot causing arousal.  
Her haunches are shining, her hips are lapis lazuli,  
when her backside descends from above,  
to spread feeling of arousal,  
to reduce inhibitions of arousal,  
arousal extends from above like a ziggurat wall.<sup>28</sup>

Several Mesopotamian magical cures (also present, verbatim, in ancient Hattusas) for erectile dysfunction involved women "talking dirty" to their men, sometimes with props.

A striking feature of these incantations is that they are mostly ostensibly recited by women to increase the sexual ability of men. . . . Some incantations are quite explicit, as, for example, the one that says, "My vagina is the vagina of a female dog. His penis is the penis of a dog. Just as the vagina of a female dog

<sup>25</sup> As ever, our evidence from places such as Cyprus, Crete, and Greece is not of a kind to allow for this kind of analysis.

<sup>26</sup> Mazzone 2002: 367–370.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid: passim.*

<sup>28</sup> Geller 2002: 137. The incantation cure involves smearing the girl's breasts with butter, which is certainly a fine means of dealing with arousal, although it does raise the question of what the male needed an incantation for, then.

holds fast the penis of a dog, (so may my vagina hold fast his penis)!

...

"Get an erection like a wild bull!" and "At the head of my bed is tied a buck. At the foot of my bed is tied a ram. The one at the head of my bed, get an erection, make love to me! The one at the foot of my bed, get an erection, caress me!" In a similar text we have "Buck, caress me! [Ram], copulate with me!" and "[At the head] of my bed a ram is tied. [At the foot of my bed] a weaned sheep is tied. Around my waist their wool is tied. [Like a ram eleven times], like a weaned sheep twelve times, like a bat thirteen times [make love to me, and like a pig] fourteen times, like a wild bull fifty times, like a s[ta]g fifty times!" And in another text we have "Make love to me with the love-making of a wolf!"<sup>29</sup>

The Middle Hittite incantation mentioned briefly above is Paskuwatti's ritual to the goddess Uliliyassi against impotence.<sup>30</sup> In this ritual the female functionary Paskuwatti first uses a female virgin in her ritual to cure the man's impotence (line 3). She then uses sympathetic magic to "cure" the man of "effeminacy" (l. 4):

I place a spindle and distaff in the patient's [hand], and he comes under the gates. When he steps forward through the gates, I take the spindle and distaff away from him. I give him a bow (and) [arro]w(s), and say (to him) all the while: "I have just taken femininity away from you and given you masculinity in return. You have cast off the (sexual) behavior expected [of women]; [you have taken] to yourself the behavior expected of men!"<sup>31</sup>

The man goes through a three-day long ritual involving incubation, invoking the goddess's presence by his side (l. 8):

"Come to this man! You are his 'wife of children' for him! So look after him! Turn to him (in favor) and speak to him! Turn your maidservant (his wife) over to him, and he will become a yoke. Let him take his wife and produce for himself sons and daughters!"<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Biggs 2002: 72–73, excerpted. So, in addition to ancient Mesopotamian evidence for bondage, we also seem to have here evidence for doing it goat-style, sheep-style, deer-style, bat-style, bull-style, piggy-style, and wolf-style – no doubt a rougher version of doggy-style.

<sup>30</sup> For an alternate suggestion, that the ritual was enacted as an antidote to homosexuality, see Miller 2010: *passim*.

<sup>31</sup> Trans. Hoffner 1987: 277. This is as fine an example of ancient construction of binary gender as I have come across.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 278.



In Egypt the long-standing iconographies of the nude female – including potency figurines and New Kingdom depictions of naked female dancers, musicians, serving girls, and even handles on cosmetic devises – have been interpreted as “stimulators” for sexuality, fertility, and birth.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, mythically, the ultimate act of creation was (Re-)Atum’s act of masturbation, whereby a masculine deity achieved orgasm with the help of his feminine hand. Male sexuality and fertility were thus dependent to some extent on feminine stimulation.

Several of the kourotrophic images discussed in the previous chapters could easily be understood to have “stimulation” as an aspect of their function(s): the various kourotrophic figurines from Egypt, the nude potency figurines from Egypt and the Levant, the bronze and lead pieces from Anatolia, and the terracotta plaques from both Mesopotamia and Iran, as well as their non-kourotrophic variants. However, one need not see this aspect of their use as a wholly masculine interest. As discussed below, the image of the healthy, fertile, female body could be just as appealing to women in need of these attributes as to men seeking their eroticism and resultant effects.

Once the woman “received” the child from the man, it was her role to incubate it, give birth to it, feed it, and care for it for the next several years. Thus, the female body was required not only for the initial implantation of the child, but also for the ongoing maintenance of the children through the period of breast-feeding. “When you were born after your months, she was yet yoked <to you>, her breast in your mouth for three years.” Although bottle feeding was a possibility (and thus could have been handled by males), all documents at our disposal indicate that the standard replacement for a mother’s milk was the milk of a hired wet nurse.<sup>34</sup> All aspects of the incubation, birth, and maintenance of children, then, were intimately bound up, long-term, with the female body.

Furthermore, if one’s woman/wife could not bear offspring, the cure for this problem, from the man’s perspective, was to get another woman. The *Law Code of Hammurapi* (§§144–147) regulates the process by which nonreproducing *naditu*-priestesses provide a *šugitu* to their husbands for the bearing of children. According to the final statute,

<sup>33</sup> Roth 2000: 194; Robins 1996: 30–34; Pinch 1993: 220.

<sup>34</sup> Stol 2000: 181–185; Robins 1993: 89–91.

“If she does not bear children, her mistress may sell her.”<sup>35</sup> Two legal documents from the Late Bronze Age Syrian city of Alalakh (Level IV) provide very tangible evidence for the need, use, and replacement of female bodies for producing children. Document AT 92 (3.101B) is a marriage contract between Naidu (wife) and Iri-halpa (husband). According to lines 15’–16’ of the contract, “If Naidu does not give birth to an heir, then the daughter of her brother, Iwaššura, will be given (to Iri-halpa).”<sup>36</sup> Document AT 93 (3.101C) is a similar contract between Zunzuri and Idatti (ll. 2–9):

From this day, before [Niqmepa the king:]  
 The daughter of Ilimili,  
 Zunzuri, Idat[ti  
 Has taken for a wife.  
 Two hundred shekels of silver and thirty shekels of gold  
 He has given as a bride price.  
 [I]f she has not given birth after seven years,  
 He may take a second wife.<sup>37</sup>

Men need children, but men cannot get children without the medium of the female body. As a result, from the masculine perspective, to desire children is not merely to desire children (unless you’re Hesiod), but to desire the female body that will incubate, give birth to, and nourish the children. Even the myths discussed in Chap. 1 that present male deities as getting pregnant and giving birth required some kind of female intervention: Metis to conceive Athena, Ninhursag to “deliver” Enki. Even Kumarbi was given the ultrafeminine *harnau* birthing-stool to sit on.<sup>38</sup>

The interesting corollary to this is that, from the female perspective, issues of childbearing and rearing *also* come down to the female body. Should a male not be able to reproduce with his wife (and the problem is not impotence), he gets another female body, as discussed above. If a woman cannot reproduce with her husband, she, too, must get another female body, either by “fixing” the fertility of her own or by providing her husband with a substitute. “Fixing” her body consisted of standard processes such as using magical incantations and/or objects and/or the use of specified plants to promote fertility. One Babylonian

<sup>35</sup> Trans. Roth 2003: 344–345.

<sup>36</sup> Trans. Hess 2003: 252.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Puhvel 2002: 549.

text prescribes "Silver, gold, iron, copper, in total 21 (amulet) stones, in order that a woman who is not pregnant become pregnant: you string it on a linen yarn, you put it on her neck."<sup>39</sup> Marten Stol provides an extensive treatment of the plants used to treat the "woman who does not get pregnant" in his book *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible*.<sup>40</sup>

For that which concerns substitutes, the legal texts from Alalakh cited above give evidence for this, as do the references to the *šugitu* in the Codex Hammurapi. A papyrus document from New Kingdom Egypt relates how Rennefer allowed her younger brother Padiu to marry Taiemniut, the eldest of three children born to a slave girl bought by her husband Nebnefer. Gay Robins suggests that, because the couple had no recorded children of their own, Nebnefer may have bought the slave girl specifically for reproduction, and that the three children were his own.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the most famous story of a woman providing her husband with a surrogate is the narrative of Abram, Sarai, and Hagar (Genesis 16: 1–4):

Abram's wife Sarai had borne him no children. Now she had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and she said to Abram, "You see that the Lord has not allowed me to bear a child. Take my slave-girl; perhaps I shall found a family through her." Abram agreed to what his wife said; so Sarai, Abram's wife, brought her slave-girl, Hagar the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife/concubine. . . . He lay with Hagar and she conceived.

At no point, it seems, does the infertile woman go looking for another husband. Likewise, should a mother not produce enough milk (or should she not desire to breast-feed), the solution was the hiring of another woman to perform this function.

It appears that only in cases where the male has become convinced that it is he who is "barren" does the adoption of heirs emerge as a solution. A Twentieth-Dynasty personal letter from Deir el-Medina to the scribe Nekhemmut reads,

You are not a man since you are unable to make your wives pregnant like your fellowmen. A further matter: You abound in being exceedingly stingy. You give no one anything. As for

<sup>39</sup> Stol 2000: 35.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*: 52–59.

<sup>41</sup> Robins 1993: 58.

him who has no children, he adopts an orphan instead [to] bring him up. It is his responsibility to pour water onto your hands as one's own eldest son.<sup>42</sup>

Adoption could, and did, occur for reasons other than infertility, including the adoption of one's own children born to slaves, or the adoption of a new spouse's children from a previous marriage, or to settle a debt (the bride-price acquired by adopted daughters could be quite high in some areas, such as Mesopotamian Nuzi), or quite simply through pity for an orphaned child. For example, a late-second millennium legal training exercise from Mesopotamia – *ana ittišu* (VII iii, 9–10) – records, “This *qadištu* (a cult functionary) took in a child from the street; at the breast with human milk [she nursed him].”<sup>43</sup> However, adoption as a remedy for infertility specifically appears as a solution only once the infertility can be ascribed to the male; no female body would “work” for him.

For both men and women, then, there was a reason to associate children very specifically with the female body. This is not because, as is typically understood in modern times, the female body is the font of new life. As we have seen repeatedly, many ancient cultures understood that new life came from the male. However, the female body was necessary to provoke the male to give rise to new life, and to sustain that new life once formed. Both men and women required a fertile female body for the eroticism that led to reproduction and for the ongoing maintenance (read: feeding) (and pretty much everything else) of the child. When there were problems with conception or lactation, the solution was another female body.

This fact may explain why the *kourotrophos* is relatively rare, especially as a subcategory of larger corpora that contain, or are even exclusively composed of, images of non-kourotrophic females. Ancient Egypt produced non-kourotrophic female figurines in addition to the *kourotrophoi*, non-kourotrophic potency figurines, and countless statues of queens not holding baby kings. The Nude Female is one of the oldest and most prolific motifs in the ancient Near East, of which the Levantine kourotrophic potency figurines form only the tiniest subset. The same might be said for the Mesopotamian and Iranian terracotta plaques, which themselves were part of an even larger corpus of images male, female, divine, and monstrous. Kourotrophic plank

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*: 77–78.

<sup>43</sup> Westenholz 1989: 251.

figurines existed side by side with non-kourotrophic yet female plank figurines, and the same goes for the bird-faced figurines of later generations. Kourotrophic Mycenaean terracottas were but a subset of the larger category of female *phis*, *psis*, and *taus*. If we might understand that the female body was (is) a clearly recognized *sine qua non* for the acquisition of children, including the aspects of production, then we might also understand that it was (the image of) this body even more than the image of the child itself that was desired or deemed relevant. The healthy female body excites the male to potency, the healthy female body nourishes the man's seed. The healthy female body is the gateway to progeny, and thus must be sought both for its own intrinsic value and for what it can provide.

The incessant importance of the female body in child production may also explain why goddesses, but not gods, are portrayed as kourotrophic. As the data from the previous chapters have shown, gods did play a significant role in the creation of offspring, directly through their inseminating functions (with a partner or without); serving as assistants in parturition, like the Mesopotamian god Gir; or protecting newborn children and their mothers, like Egyptian Bes. Male deities might even be invoked to help in matters of human reproduction. Etana called on Shamash for help in begetting an heir; whereas a prayer to the moon god Sîn claimed, "Who has no son, you make acquire a son; without you a woman who does not bear will not get seed or pregnancy."<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, no male deities appear as kourotrophoi in the art. As with mortal fathers, the daily realities of child care were simply not portrayed visually for male deities.

### Summary

The image of woman and child is neither eternal nor universal, nor even necessarily common. Even where it appears in prominence its meanings are varied. The Divine Wet Nurse and the potency figurines existed side by side both in Egypt and in the Levant, showing that multiple conceptions of the kourotrophic motif could exist within one society simultaneously.

A similar dynamic can hold true even in a society where kourotrophic imagery is rare, such as Mesopotamia. Here, once again, the

<sup>44</sup> Trans. Stol 2000: 35, with references.

kourotrophos may represent a named goddess such as Ninhursag or Nintu, nourishing children either divine or mortal. The kourotrophos may also be a mortal woman whose iconic presence attracts a life-mate, family, progeny, or good luck. In the upper echelons of society, the kourotrophic image may advertise the elevated status of the royal wife and consort, who gives birth to the royal heir.

Likewise, the entire notion of woman/mother/goddess-with-child could be completely alien. The kourotrophos appeared in the Levant only under excessive influence from Egypt, just as she was a short-lived and rather late development in the Mycenaean repertoire. You could not force her into Minoan Crete with a stick. With the exception of Egypt, no matter where she was found, she was atypical.

It is not merely the “universal” notion of kourotrophic imagery that must be dismantled, though, but a full range of preconceived notions about the portrayal of women in ancient art. As stated in the Introduction, the image of the kourotrophos is commonly identified as a mother,<sup>45</sup> in spite of the fact that extremely few images of women either pregnant or giving birth have come from the ancient soil – Chalcolithic and Archaic Cyprus<sup>46</sup> and Iron I Palestine<sup>47</sup> have produced a handful. Such an automatic identification flies in the face of such images as the Egyptian Divine Wet Nurse, where a host of different goddesses, none the actual mother of the king, nurse the young king as a sign of grace. The same holds true for the winged goddess in ivory from Ugarit.

In instances where biological motherhood does appear to be at issue, we must once again take care in assessing the meaning(s) of the “maternal” relationship. It has been common in the past for such portrayals to be dubbed “Mother Goddesses,” even when there is no iconographic evidence for the divinity of the female (or child) portrayed.<sup>48</sup> Such divine status must only be ascribed when alternate iconographic evidence exists, such as horned miter, solar disk, wings, standing upon a lion, *polos* cap, or, most conveniently, inscribed identification. In the absence of divine markers, we must consider the notion that the females depicted are mortal and represent mortal concerns. So much would appear to be the case in Early Bronze Age Cyprus, where females

<sup>45</sup> Karageorghis 1991: 92, “That the female figure holding an infant symbolizes ‘motherhood’ or fecundity is quite obvious.”

<sup>46</sup> Bolger 1992: *passim*.

<sup>47</sup> Albright 1939: 119.

<sup>48</sup> Minoan “goddesses” have been dubbed “Mother Goddesses” even in the absence of a child. See Goodison and Morris 1998: 114.

holding infants seem to have more to do with the identification and placement of women in society than as aspects of religious devotion. Likewise with the Egyptian medicinal vessels that use kourotrophic imagery to advertise their contents. The Babylonian kourotrophos appears to be a good luck symbol. Only by recognizing the presence of mortal women in the artistic repertoire can we begin to evaluate their roles in any ancient society.

The varied roles of kourotrophoi must also force a reconsideration of the relationship between the female body and concepts of fertility. Throughout the Twentieth Century, especially, any emphasis on the sexual attributes of female images has resulted automatically in theories of fertility and fecundity, be that human or universal.<sup>49</sup> I have written elsewhere about alternate explanations for sexual iconography in the absence of children, noting that sexuality and eroticism themselves must be recognized as sources of power both mortal and divine.<sup>50</sup> Further ideas come to mind concerning kourotrophism. The presence of kourotrophic imagery in societies where fertility is of extreme importance in religious ideology (which is not to separate it from daily ideology) may of course have reference to various notions of fertility. We see this in Egypt, where the female body plus child might refer to reincarnation or successful conception and parturition.<sup>51</sup> Such ideology, however, cannot be taken as the norm elsewhere and everywhere, and we must also consider the fact that (human) fertility was not always believed to be of such extreme importance.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, and quite significantly, we must recognize that fertility was not necessarily a female prerogative. Quite to the contrary, evidence from Egypt and the Near East (where documents are available) indicate that it was the males who were deemed fertile, with females being the instigators of that fertility, and the caretakers of the results.

The kourotrophos is, in many ways, the ultimate embodiment of this understanding of male-oriented fertility. The kourotrophos appears as the alluring female who stimulates the male to potency. By her very nature, she is the woman who nurtures offspring. She is not necessarily a mother (although she certainly can be); but, with very few exceptions, she is the female who nourishes, protects, and, most importantly, forms connections through the medium of her body.

<sup>49</sup> See especially Budin 2002: 315–316 on this issue.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*: *passim*.

<sup>51</sup> Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006: 139.

<sup>52</sup> Assante 2003: 27.

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