

Food- and Health-Related Practices and Behaviors

Pregnancy, and Postnatal Periods

The Evidence from Early and Medieval Islam

by

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First, let me begin by saying that it is a pleasure and honor to be invited to participate today. In my nutritional geography career, much of my research has blended history with food and diet, beginning with my collaboration with Bill Darby and Paul Ghalioungui on our book, *Food: The Gift of Osiris*, which treated aspects of ancient Egyptian food and diet based upon data from mummy autopsies, tomb art, and temple texts. It is rare for professionals in my field to meet historians interested in the study of food, and I thank you for your hospitality.

Professor Morony has circulated our papers for your inspection, contemplation, review, and critique. In the ten minutes allocated to me I will not, therefore, merely repeat information readily available from my paper, but will instead consider and extend selected themes that I identified and set them within a broader context by providing insights and observations from field work in Eastern Mediterranean states since 1964.

Fertility tests, pregnancy tests, and gender prediction activities are widely discussed in the ancient Egyptian literature. Ghalioungui (1973, pp. 111-112) wrote that women inserted cloves of garlic or onion vaginally; if the garlic or onion smell appeared on her breath the next morning, she was considered fertile. The *London Medical Papyrus* (1:177) relates a pregnancy test whereby women's urine was sprinkled on unidentified leafy vegetables. The *Berlin Papyrus* (2:2-5) used women's urine as a predictor for gender.

Tests for fertility and pregnancy are not identified in the Hadith literature that I surveyed. I find it interesting that given Muslim attributes towards fatalism and Hadith that clearly forbid foretelling the future, that there is a non-food-related Hadith regarding gender prediction:

As for the resemblance of the child to its parents: If a man has sexual intercourse with his wife and gets discharge first, the child will resemble the father, and if the woman gets discharge first, the child will resemble her (Sahih Bukhari. 4:55:546).

The Talmud relates that “[The fetus] eats what its mother eats and drinks what its mother drinks (Niddah. 30b). While this critical observation links aspects of maternal diet to the developing fetus, I know of no Talmud passage or subsequent text from Medieval Jewish physicians that specify encouraged or proscribed foods during pregnancy. While the Koran and Hadith are likewise silent on this topic, not so subsequent Muslim physicians like Ibn Sina, who wrote:

Take precautions as regards the food of the pregnant woman so that her taste does not become depraved... If the blood of the pregnant woman [becomes] agitated, do not bleed her (Poem on Medicine. p. 60).

Let me address two additional points regarding activities during pregnancy. First, Jews, Christians, and Muslims fast. Jewish fasts, like Yom Kippur, are total: no food for the prescribed period. Both Christian and Muslim fasts, in contrast, are partial: Christian fasts during Advent, Lent, and the August fast to commemorate Mary-Theotokos are periods when intake of specific food categories are proscribed (i.e. meat, dairy, oil), but the faithful can eat throughout the day. In Islam the Ramadan fast forbids eating and drinking during daylight hours. Pregnant Jews and

Christians are allowed to fast; pregnant Muslims are forbidden. Nutritionally, the religious dictates of the three faiths pose no medical-hardship to mother or developing fetus.

Second, most of the texts I surveyed were silent regarding women's activities during pregnancy. In a sense, women were "put away" once pregnancy was determined. Still, there were intriguing exercise-related issues mentioned in selected ancient Greek and Christian Byzantine accounts.

Aristotle (Rhetorica. 7-8) described how pregnant women should care for themselves by taking exercise. However, he also cautioned pregnant women to keep their minds quiet by not thinking too much, since too much mental activity, in his view, agitated the developing fetus.

Paul of Aegina (Epitome. 1.1) discussed exercise as a means of reducing what could be now termed "morning sickness. Lest one consider Paulus a visionary, however, the same passage also recommended that pregnant women drink yellow, fragrant, aged wine.

Let me turn to foods consumed during delivery. Globally, ancient texts abound in reference to such foods. Chinese texts, for example, identify chicken brain, pork heart, kidney, venison, foods mixed with sweet basil, honey, and saffron. In the Middle Eastern study area, however, no ancient Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Jewish, or Christian text that I reviewed identified such foods. Ibn Sina, the famous Medieval Muslim physician, however, was an exception when he wrote:

When the time of delivery arrives... let her food be mostly fat; make her drink greasy broth. Protect her from noise, jumping, terrors, clamoring, and trauma. If the delivery is difficult, let her take a decoction of dates and fenugreek (Poem on Medicine. p. 60).

The so-called "modern-scientific" screening of neonates is relatively recent, dating to the Apgar test published 44 years ago (Apgar, 1953). If one remains objective distinctive parallels may be drawn between ancient and modern tests for neonatal viability. In my background paper I provided the passage from Soranus of Ephesus (Gynaeciorum. 2: 10: 79) that outlined the midwife's actions after delivery, how neonates were inspected, evaluated, and which characteristics led to exposure.

Two years ago in 1996, during the political campaign for president, Americans were also exposed to humor and sarcasm regarding how to raise children: does it take a village to raise a child, or a family, and if a family, then how should the family be defined? Despite the political rhetoric, little thought was given to the specific words, "to raise a child." The words "to raise" in this context, of course, were not related to English verbs such as "to bring up," "to foster," "to nurture," "to rear," "to support," or "to teach." The phrase "to raise a child," originated with the ancient Romans when the neonate was placed upon the ground before the pater familias; he picked up the infant in his arms (tollere) and raised the neonate from the ground (sublatus), his act was acknowledgment (susceptio) of paternity and that the neonate was a member of his family. If, however, the pater familias refused and did not raise the neonate from the earth, it -- and therefore was an "it" -- was deemed outcast, without rights, and was taken by the midwife or family slave to another place, to be exposed (exponere).

Non-food related Hadith texts clearly separate Muslim from Greek, Roman, and early Christian views on this subject and specific Hadith consider legal status of the fetus and potential neonate (Malik's Muwatta. 43: 7: 6), and acceptance and responsibility of neonatal paternity:

Allah, the Exalted, will veil Himself from any man who disowns his child when he looks at him (Sunan Abu-Dawud. 12: 2256); and The Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) said: There is no unlawful claiming of paternity in Islam. What was done in pre-Islam times has been annulled. The child is attributed to the one on whose bed it is born (Sunan Abu-Dawud. 12: 2267).

In my examination of ancient Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim texts, I found no parallel to the Islamic concept of food-related blessings given to neonates:

Narrated Asma' bint Abu Bakr: I conceived 'Abdullah bin Az Zubair at Mecca and went out (of Mecca) while I was about to give birth. I came to Medina and encamped at Quba', and gave birth at Quba.' Then I brought the child to Allah's Apostle and placed it (on his lap). He asked for a date, chewed it, and put his saliva in the mouth of the child. So the first thing to enter its stomach was the saliva of Allah's Apostle. Then he did its Tahnik with a date, and invoked Allah to bless him. It was the first child born in the Islamic era, therefore they (Muslims) were very happy with its birth, for it had been said to them that the Jews had bewitched them, and so they would not produce any offspring (Sahih Bukhari. 7: 66: 378).

What a wonderful passage. Notice what is described. The neonate is bonded to the faith of its parents, with one of the foods that characterizes Arab, Muslim society. Notice, too, that the passage also considers the magic spell cast by the Jewish residents of Yathrib upon the Prophet, the Ashab, and the Ansar... but the subsequent birth of Abdullah ibn az-Zubair, the grandson of Abu Bakr, revealed that the Jewish spell had no power.

Now, speaking about fertility or sterility spells. Here is an amulet, thought by some people I work among to cause pregnancy within three months of holding and touching it. While most of you are historians, I also suspect that you accept the premise that scientific inquiry is superior to the rule of magic. So now I present you with an opportunity to touch or not touch this amulet. Here is the issue: if you are female and touch this amulet it is said that you will become pregnant within three months; if you are male and touch it, it is said that you will impregnate your partner within three months. Lets see...

One of the more interesting passages in the Koran, with subsequent Hadith consideration, deals with the duration of pregnancy and lactation. The Koran holds that a 6 month delivery, coupled with 24 months of lactation, is acceptable:

We have charged man, that he be kind to his parents; his mother bore him painfully, and painfully she gave birth to him; his bearing and his weaning are thirty months (The Sand-Dunes. 46:15). and...

Malik related to me that he had heard that Uthman ibn Affan was brought a woman who had given birth after six months and he ordered her to be stoned. Ali ibn Abi Talib said to him, "She

does not deserve that. Allah, the Blessed, the Exalted, says in His Book, 'Their carrying and weaning is thirty months,' and he said, 'Mothers suckle their children for two full years for whoever wishes to complete the suckling.' Pregnancy [therefore] can then be six months, so she does not deserve to be stoned (Malik's Muwatta. 41:1:11)."

Subsequent medical texts by Arib Ibn Sa'id (Kitab Khalq al-Janin wa-Tadbir al-Habala wal Mawludin). Cited by Ullman, 1978, pp. 112-113) and Muhammad al-Biruni (India. Cited by: Boyd and Scammon, 1980, p. 117) describe fetal development between months 1-6, and conclude that by the 7th month (one could equally read by the end of the 6th month/beginning of the 7th month), the fetus was fully formed. The Classical Greek view was that the fetus was completed between 210-300 days (Hippocrates. Nutriment. 42; Aristotle. Historia Animalium. 583b). The view that the fetus was completed by the end of the 6th month/early 7th month also appears in the Caraka Samhita medical text of ancient Hinduism, dated to 1500 B.C.E., but the subsequent Garbha Upanishid (Dasgupta, 1932. Vol. 2. pp. 312-313) held that the fetus was fully developed only by the 8th month.

Returning to lactation, let us consider the issue of wet nurses. The Hadith literature clearly focuses on kinship relationships that result from nursing: who nurses; who receives; quantity of milk and number of suckings; and from these behaviors and practices, who thereafter is related to whom, and by extension, who may or may not marry because of related incest taboos.

While Islamic traditions associated with lactation are codified and complex, other Mediterranean societies exhibit parallel considerations. Among Greek Christians today, wet nurses may suckle only neonates of the same gender, since nursing completes a bond that leaps across familial and genetic considerations: those who suckle from the same breast become brother and sister, regardless of parentage. This relationship has given rise to a number of soap opera or short story plots that lead to moral and/or financial disaster once a married couple find out that they were suckled by the same wet nurse.

A number of years ago we completed a study of pregnant and lactating California vegetarians who regularly cross-nursed, that is, they gathered at one home during mid-morning to socialize, then each would start nursing their own child, but one by one they would pass their infants to an adjacent friend, and receive another neonate from a nearby friend, and so on around the circle. Interesting.

I conclude my brief comments with an examination of the issue of delay in naming the neonate. Aristotle wrote that the majority of deaths in infancy occurred before the child was a week old, and therefore, it was better to name the child from that age [after day 7] because "it [then had] a better chance of survival." Wiedemann (1989, p. 17, 21) argued that Roman neonates were perceived as non-speakers, in Latin in fantes, a description that ultimately gave rise to the English word, "infant." The first eight days of the in fantes' life were called the primordia. During this period the in fantes also was called pupus, that implied the neonate was weak and unformed. According to Johnston (1932, p. 77-78) Roman neonates received their given name (praenomen) at the conclusion of the primordia, a celebration held on the eighth day for girls, ninth day for

boys. This naming celebration, called the dies lustricus or dies nominum, implied the neonate would survive.

In contrast, paternity is acknowledged in Islam upon delivery, but there is a parallel delay in naming the neonate. Two Hadith apply (Sunan Abu-Dawud. 15: 2831; Sunan Abu-Dawud. 15: 2837) and this celebration is variously called the festival of the seventh day or festival of the week (e.g. Eid al-Osboor).

Narrated Samurah ibn Jundub: The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: A boy is in pledge for his Aqiqah. Sacrifice is made for him on the seventh day, his head is shaved and is smeared with blood (Sunan Abu-Dawud, Book 15, Number 2831).

Narrated Buraydah ibn al-Hasib: When a boy was born to one of us in the pre-Islamic period, we sacrificed a sheep and smeared his head with its blood; but when Allah brought Islam, we sacrificed a sheep, shaved his head and smeared his head with saffron (Sunan Abu-Dawud, Book 15, Number 2837).

In Egypt there is the standard Muslim tradition of not naming the neonate for seven days, but the festival has an especially interesting food-related connection. At this festival attended primarily by women the neonate is bathed, dried, then bounced inside a large kitchen sieve. Amid joyful comments and ululations from the attending women, handfuls of barley and wheat, sometimes lentils, are poured over the neonate's body. The mother shakes the sieve, the seeds that have touched the neonate's body pass through the sieve, are collected, and a portion returned to those attending. Amid the celebration activities, the neonate normally fusses, cries, usually urinates and "waters" the seeds as they bounce over, across, and down its body. These seeds are saved for symbolic plantings and their growth portends that a good crop will be forthcoming. The celebration mirrors the cycle of creation: the seeds are perceived as dead, the neonate is perceived as the essence of life, the dead seeds touch its body and are imbued with life's essence. The special seeds are planted in the earth, and re-emerge as new life, an endless, mysterious cycle that dates to the dawn of human existence (Grivetti: unpublished observations, 1964-1967, 1969).

Here is an artistic representation of the Eid al-Osboor ceremony..... as sketched by my friend, the noted Egyptian artist, Rifaat Ahmad.

Finally, let me express once again my thanks and appreciation for being asked to participate in this History Colloquium. At the conclusion of the other speakers, I will be pleased to respond to your questions.