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A Tearful and Busy Mother: An Approach to the Construction of Motherhood through the Study of a Mesopotamian Baby Incantation[1]

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Abstract

As a way to explore certain aspects related to the construction of motherhood, and by extension of an ideal of femininity in ancient Mesopotamia, in this article we examine a first millennium BCE baby incantation known to us thanks to two duplicates found in the city of Assur. More specifically, we concentrate on the two references to the mother in this text. In the first one the mother herself cries when she sees that she cannot stop her baby's crying. In the second one the mother is presented as unable to attend to the work she has to do because of the baby's crying. In our analysis we argue that both

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references underline important pillars in the construction of femininity. On the one hand we emphasise that the crying of the mother can be read, at least partially, as an empathetic reaction. On the other, we defend that the busy mother in the text embodies the ideal of the industrious woman – in contrast to the negative archetype of the lazy woman, a frequent trope in Sumerian and Akkadian literature.

Keywords: *motherhood; gender; baby incantation; Mesopotamia; crying; emotions*

Introduction

Crying is a situation that anyone who cares for a baby has to deal with, especially in its first months of life. Some Mesopotamian texts, among them the ones known as baby incantations, reflect this experience. Often these texts refer to the reactions of mothers, fathers, nannies, wet nurses, gods or goddesses to a child's incessant crying. In this article we look at the reaction of one of these groups, the mothers, in an attempt to explore certain aspects related to the construction of motherhood, and by extension of an ideal of femininity, in ancient Mesopotamia.

The article consists of four parts, followed by some concluding remarks. First, we briefly contextualise the first millennium BCE incantation that will be the primary source of our study. Second, we offer a brief approach to the study of crying, as crying is the trigger of the whole situation. We then analyse the two references to the mother in the text: in the third section, when she herself cries when she sees that the baby will not stop crying, and in the fourth section, when she is presented as being unable to attend to her work because of the baby's crying. In this last

section, we contrast this evocation of the idea of the industrious woman with the negative archetype of the lazy woman, a frequent trope in Sumerian and Akkadian literature.

A first millennium BCE baby incantation as starting point: the sources and their potential

To calm crying children in ancient Mesopotamia, caregivers occasionally turned to professionals as attested through some of the baby incantations designed for this purpose.[4] They did so not only because the babies' crying caused them stress, but also sparked anger in the divine spheres. This situation is portrayed in the texts through a myriad of human, animal, and divine characters who are disturbed by the crying or, in some cases, who come to help the baby. Moreover the texts are rich in metaphors alluding to the silence when the child eventually goes to sleep.[5] At this point it is worth recalling the plot of the well-

[4] For a brief contextualisation of baby incantations in the framework of Mesopotamian incantations, with a collection of previous studies, see Lorenzo Verderame, "«Perché non dormi bambino?» Scongiuri Babilonesi del II millennio per quietare un bambino," In *Antiche infanzie. Percezioni e gestione sacrale dell'infanzia nelle culture antiche*, ed. Anna Maria Gloria Capomacchia and Elena Zocca (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2020b), 20–1, particularly footnotes 1 and 3 for previous references. For the definition of some keywords in the debates about these texts, such as "magic", "incantation", or even "ritual", as used in Assyriological studies, see Sam Mirelman, "Mesopotamian Magic in Text and Performance," in *Mesopotamian Medicine and Magic: Studies in Honor of Markham J. Geller*, ed. Strahil V. Panayotov and Ludek Vacín (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2018).

[5] However, silence is not always the desirable scenario. On the ambivalence of the perception of noise and silence in ancient Mesopotamian sources see, for instance, Nicla De Zorzi, "Rumori dalla città: le percezione culturale dei suoni nell'antica Mesopotamia," in *La città. Realtà e valori simbolici*,

known story of the *Atra-hasīs*, a mythological story about the creation of the world, which associates human noise with the disturbance of the gods' rest, and their punishment of humankind in the form of a great flood.[6] Therefore, there is a connection between this myth and the baby-incantations designed to calm agitated infants, because in both contexts the noise caused by humans or by babies crying is perceived as annoying. Consequently, some baby-incantations can be considered as abbreviated texts revolving around the same ideas as the myth, which reproduce the sequence of noise, the interruption of sleep, and divine anger.[7]

The complex idiosyncrasy of baby incantations, that is, texts which are incantations due to their function and use but which

ed. Alberto Ellero, Franco Luciani and Annapaola Zaccaria Ruggiu (Padova: S.A.R.G.O.N. Editrice, 2011), 1–31; Lorenzo Verderame, "Noisy City, Silent Steppe, Tweeting Marsh. Soundscapes in Sumerian Literature," in *Sensing the Past: Detecting the Use of the Five Senses in Ancient near Eastern Contexts*, ed. Davide Nadali and Frances Pinnock (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2020a): 85–99.

[6] For an overview of translations and studies on the composition and its different manuscripts, see the references and insights provided by Dahlia Shehata, *Annotierte Bibliographie Zum Altbabylonischen Atramḫasīs-Mythos* (Göttingen: Seminar für Keilschriftforschung Göttingen, 2001). See particularly pp. 4–22 for a summary of the plot and parts of the text.

[7] On the perception of certain sounds such as the crying of a baby as disturbing, and the need to stop these sounds see, among others (ordered by publication date), Walter Farber, "Magic at the Cradle. Babylonian and Assyrian Lullabies," *Anthropos* 85 (1990): 145; Karel Van der Toorn. "Magic at the Cradle: A Reassessment," in *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical, and Interpretative Perspectives*, ed. Tzvi Abusch (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1999), 139–4; JoAnn Scurlock, "Ancient Mesopotamian House Gods," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 3 (2003): 99; Yağmur Heffron, "Revisiting 'Noise' (rigmu) in Atra-Ḫasīs in Light of Baby Incantations," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 73 (2014): 83; David A. Bosworth, *Infant Weeping in Akkadian, Hebrew, and Greek Literature* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 33–35 and 53–64; Anne-Caroline Rendu Loisel, *Les chants du monde: le paysages sonore de l'ancienne Mésopotamie* (Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Midi, 2016), chap. 6, https://books.openedition.org/ pumi/12549.

from the literary point of view resemble lullabies,[8] allows scholars to use them to approach a variety of topics such as childhood, health and medicine, magic, music and sound, and parenthood.[9] With regard to the latter, one possible path to follow is the analysis of the portrayal of mothers and fathers, who are among the human caregivers mentioned in the incantations. This article is a modest contribution to this line of research, focusing on the busy and tearful mother mentioned in two lines of an incantation text preserved in two duplicated tablets: VAT 8896 (Vorderasiatisches Museum Berlin, Germany) and A 139 (Istanbul Arkeoloji Müzeleri, Turkey). As incantations repeat certain motifs, the case study highlighted here resonates

[8] Scholars debate the link between these incantations and lullabies, and also the literary nature of incantations and the oral or written origins of the baby-incantations. For some elements of this debate during the early years, the texts were published as a collection, see Farber, "Magic at the Cradle" and Van der Toorn. "Magic at the Cradle". See also Markham J. Geller, "Review of 'Schlaf, Kindchen, Schlaf! Mesopotamische Baby-Beschwörungen und –Rituale', Walter Farber," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 36-37 (1989-1990). For a later overview of this debate, with some more elements, see Verderame, "«Perché non dormi bambino?»," 26–28. Incantations have also been considered as literary texts. To this respect see Mirelman, "Mesopotamian Magic," 348 and particularly footnote 14. On the broader debate on how to define literary texts in the ancient Near Eastern tradition, see Beate Pongratz-Leisten, "Approaches to the Concept of Literature in Assyriology," in *The Ancient Near East and the Foundations of Europe*, ed. Manfred Krebernik and Simonetta Ponchia (Münster: Zaphon, 2020).

[9] Below we mention some examples of recent studies on these diverse topics, combining them in various ways, all with previous references: M. Érica Couto-Ferreira, "Un corpo malato. Le malattie dei bambini nella serie assiro-babilonese di diagnostici e prognostici (*sakikkû*)," in *Il corpo del bambino tra realtà e metafora nelle culture antiche*, ed. Anna Maria Gloria Capomacchia and Elena Zocca (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2017), 21–38; Kristine Henriksen Garroway and John W. Martens, *Children and Methods. Listening to and Learning from Children in the Biblical World* (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2020); Daniel Justel Vicente, "La infancia en la Antigua Mesopotamia: 25 años de investigación," *Panta Rei: revista digital de Historia y didáctica de la Historia* (2020): 43–54; Rendu Loisel, *Chants du monde*, chap. 6; Van der Toorn, "Magic at the Cradle."

in other texts, something that we will mention during the course of this analysis.[10]

The tablets with the inventory numbers mentioned above are duplicates of the same text, a baby incantation written in Akkadian.[11] Both tablets present a colophon by Kişir-Nabû, who is identified as its copyist.[12] The tablets, which can be dated to the mid-7th century BCE, were found at the N4 house in the city of Assur, on the banks of the River Tigris in northern Mesopotamia. The N4 house is also known in specialised studies as the "Haus des Beschwörungspriesters," as it was the home of the Bāba-šuma-ibni family, several of whom were trained and worked as exorcists. Kişir-Nabû was the great-grandson of Bāba-šuma-ibni and the nephew of Kişir-Aššur. Kişir-Aššur is a key figure in the attempts to understand the more than 1,000 tablets

[10] An overall analysis of the roles and reactions of mothers in the corpus of baby incantations is beyond the scope of the present paper. We hope our modest contribution would act as a stimulus to develop further these and other related lines of research.

[11] On the function and use of textual duplicates such as this one in the context in which it was found, see M. Érica Couto-Ferreira, "Putting Theory into Practice: Kişir-Aššur's Expertise between Textual Knowledge and Practical Experimentation." In *Mesopotamian Medicine and Magic: Studies in Honor of Markham J. Geller*, ed. Strahil V. Panayotov and Ludek Vacín (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2018), 161.

[12] As summarised by Troels Pank Arbøll, *Medicine in Ancient Assur. A Microhistorical Study of the Neo-Assyrian Healer Kişir-Aššur* (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2021), 2: "Colophons consisted of more or less formulaic elements describing from what manuscript the text was copied, who copied, checked or owned the tablet, and what titles these individuals held at the time. It is assumed that the copyists themselves wrote them". See also Arbøll, *Medicine in Ancient Assur*, 2, footnotes 1–4 for previous references on colophons, ordered by topic.

which were recovered in the N4 house, and also in the analysis of the training and career of an exorcist.[13]

These two tablets are also known in Assyriological studies by the abbreviations of the volumes by Erich Ebeling in which their hand-copies were first published: KAR 114 (VAT 8896) and LKA 143 (A 139).[14] Moreover, they are also often quoted as text number 32, in reference to the seminal volume published in 1989 by Walter Farber, titled *Schlaf, Kindchen, Schlaf! Mesopotamische Baby-Beschwörungen und -Rituale*, where these and other baby incantations were published together, for the first time, in transliteration and in translation into German.[15] There is also another, more recent, translation into German of these texts by Karl Hecker in the fourth volume of the series "Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments."[16] Below we reproduce the

[13] For a family-tree of the Bāba-šuma-ibni family and some insights into the excavation of the N4 house, the number of tablets and their characteristics see, with previous references, Arbøll, *Medicine in Ancient Assur*, 18–25. For an overview of the training and practice of these family members, with a special focus on Kiṣir-Aššur, see Couto-Ferreira, "Putting Theory into Practice," 157–64. For a collection of texts where Kiṣir-Aššur and Kiṣir-Nabû are quoted, see Heather D. Baker, *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2000), 523–4 (entry 26) and 627–8 (entry 5).

[14] We spell out abbreviations in footnotes when they are quoted for the first time in the main text (and the other way around), and provide a list at the end, to help readers who are not familiar with the use of these abbreviations by Assyriologists. In this case KAR refers to Erich Ebeling, *Keilschrifttexte aus Assur Religiösen Inhalts. Band I* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1919). LKA stands for Erich Ebeling, *Literarische Keilschrifttexte aus Assur* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1953).

[15] See Walter Farber, *Schlaf, Kindchen, Schlaf! Mesopotamische Baby-Beschwörungen und -Rituale* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1989), 23–24 for correspondence with excavation numbers and information about his new copy provided for LKA 143.

[16] Karl Hecker, "Rituale und Beschwörungen," in *Omina, Orakel, Rituale und Beschwörungen*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Gernot Wilhelm (Gütersloh: Güterslöher Verlagshaus, 2008), 106–7. This volume is abbreviated in the specialised literature as TUAT-NF 4.

translation into English published in 2016 by David A. Bosworth, in a compilation following the numbering proposed by Farber in his edition; so in this case also it is text 32:

> (Lines 1–4) The one who dwelt in darkness where no light shone, he has come out and has seen the sunlight. Why does he scream so his mother cries, and the tears of Antu in heaven stream? (Lines 5–9) "Who is this who makes such noise on earth? If it is a dog,[17] someone give it food; if it is a bird, someone throw a clod at it; if it is a mischievous human child, let someone cast the spell of Anu and Antu over him. (Lines 10–14) Let his father lie down to get the rest of his sleep; Let his mother, who has her chores to do, get her chores done". The spell is not mine; it is a spell of Ea and Asalluhi, a spell of Damu and Gula, a spell of Ningirimma, mistress of spells. (Line 15) They said it to me; I repeated it.
>
> (Line 16) Incantation: to soothe a baby.
>
> (Lines 17–21) Ritual: Place bread by the head of the baby. Recite this incantation three times. Rub it (the bread) on him from head to foot. Throw this bread before a dog. This baby will become quiet.[18]

[17] When Ebeling published the first of the two duplicates in 1919 he tentatively identified it as "Beschwörung gegen Hundebiss?" (Ebeling, *Keilschrifttexte*, 346), probably due to the mention of the noise produced by a dog in line 6 and also due to the appearance of a dog in the ritual to be performed, line 20.

[18] Bosworth, *Infant Weeping*, text 32, p. 50.

For our analysis, we concentrate on the mother of the crying child as mentioned in lines 3–4 and 10–11 in this text. In these lines, she is referred to first as a tearful mother (see below, section 3), and afterwards as a busy mother (see below, section 4). But before focusing on these two excerpts, in the next section we offer a first approach to the study of crying, as this action is crucial to understand the subsequent interpretation. On the one hand, crying is the trigger of the whole situation. On the other hand, it is one of the reactions of the mother in the incantation here under analysis.

Approaching the study of crying

Before discussing the role of tears in this baby incantation, we should first make some general comments on the significance of tears and their study from diverse approaches.[19] Emotional tears, which are a uniquely human behaviour, require the involvement of structures such as limbic brain, tear glands, respiratory system or facial muscles that are activated by certain psychological states.[20] In addition, emotional tears depend not only on psychological and cultural features, but also on age and gender.

[19] In Vikram Patel's definition, crying is "a complex secretomotor response that has as its most important characteristic the shedding of tears from the lacrimal apparatus, without any irritation of the ocular structures, and often accompanied by alterations in the muscles of facial expression, vocalisations, and in some cases sobbing, which is the convulsive inhaling and exhaling of air with spasms of the respiratory and truncal muscle groups." Vikram Patel "Crying behavior and psychiatric disorder in adults: a review," *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 34 (1993): 206–11.

[20] Ad Vingerhoets, *Why only humans weep. Unravelling the mysteries of tears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 52.

As some studies have suggested, crying shows a continuous socio-emotional development from birth to old age.[21]

In the study of crying, it is important to consider its visual and acoustic properties, and even its olfactory properties. This is especially significant with regard to infants crying because the sonorous features are an effective way for them to communicate their needs to their parents. Several studies have demonstrated that the main reasons for an infant's crying are separation from the mother, after 3-3.5 hours of being fed, and when they suffer pain. In addition, babies may cry without an apparent cause, a phenomenon known as "colic." Whereas a newborn's crying does not appear to be directed at anyone in particular, from eight months onwards, it seems focused and related to the sight of strangers or when the baby is in an unfamiliar environment.[22] Although crying patterns change with increasing age, the need for assistance when feeling lonely or helpless remains constant.

Moving on to emotional tears in women, especially in women in the initial phase of motherhood, some studies have demonstrated a positive influence of crying on their feeding behaviour, on the composition of their breast milk and on energy saving.[23] Furthermore, in a lactating mother, hearing a baby crying provokes the let-down reflex and aids the flow of breast

[21] Vingerhoets, *Why only humans weep*, 261.

[22] See the studies and references in Vingerhoets, *Why only humans weep*, 56–66.

[23] Ronald G. Barr, "Infant crying behavior and colic: an interpretation in evolutionary perspective," in *Evolutionary Medicine,* ed. W.R. Trevathan, E.O. Smith and J.J. McKenna (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 27–51.

milk. Therefore, the crying of the baby alerts the mother and, at the same time, prepares her for feeding.

As we will see, crying in the baby incantations shows how adults, mainly mothers, react to crying infants out of concern and empathy. In fact, tears are the only body fluid that is neither unpleasant nor taboo, like saliva, blood, urine, sweat, or bile among others. Among the reasons for the contrapositions between contamination and purity, crying is a survival tool which has its evolutionary roots in the calls observed in the offspring of birds and mammals when they are separated from their parents.[24]

Furthermore, contemporary studies have shown that, in the postpartum period,[25] women feel "maternity blues" or "baby blues", a period with mood swings, anxiety, headache, or irritability. Tearfulness is a frequent manifestation of these symptoms, associated not only with sadness and concern about the newborn's health, but also with self-pity, insufficient sleep, and fatigue. In the following section, we analyse the role of tears in the baby incantation in the light of these explanations, in order to understand more clearly the crying of the mother.

[24] Vingerhoets, *Why only humans weep*, 1.

[25] See all the references and studies undertaken in different countries in Vingerhoets, *Why only humans weep*, 200–1.

A tearful mother

The third and fourth lines of the text read as follows: "Why does he scream so, his mother cries, and the tears of Antu flow in heaven?"[26] These lines introduce the reader to the soundscape of the scene: child, mother, and goddess all shedding tears, and the sound of crying resonating everywhere. As pointed out by Anne-Caroline Rendu Loisel in a study of soundscapes, "c'est bien l'individu dans son être physique et affectif que l'on cherche à rejoinder,"[27] as the body is crucial to understand how this soundscape is produced and the effects that it causes. Moreover, approaching these soundscapes might help us to better understand the actions and reactions of the characters mentioned in an incantation to soothe a baby, as there is a link between sounds and the expression of emotions and feelings.[28]

At this point we might wonder why the mother responds to the tears of the baby by shedding more tears herself. Part of the

[26] Farber, *Schlaf, Kindchen, Schlaf!*, 99 translated these lines as "Warum ist er so am Schreien, dass seine Mutter weinen muss, der Antu im Himmel die Tränen kommen?". Hecker, "Rituale und Beschwörungen," 107, translated the lines as "Warum schreit es, so daß seine Mutter weint, (und) die Tränen der Antu im Himmel fließen?". Note the use of the modal verb "muss" expressing obligation in Farber's translation of line three. On Antu, the consort of the sky-god Anu in Akkadian texts, see Douglas R. Frayne and Johanna H. Stuckey, *A Handbook of Gods and Goddesses of the Ancient near East* (Pennsylvania: Eisenbrauns / The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), s.v.

[27] Rendu Loisel, *Chants du monde*, chap. 1.

[28] For a proposal of analysis of the interaction of soundscapes and taskscapes in these Mesopotamian texts to soothe a child's crying from the perspective of sensory studies, see Agnès Garcia-Ventura and Mireia López-Bertran, "Soundscapes and Taskscapes in the ancient Near East: Interactions and Perceptions," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Senses in the Ancient near East*, ed. Kiersten Neumann and Allison Thomason (London / New York: Routledge, 2022), 112–15.

answer to the question lies in our comments in the previous section; but, besides the biological or neurological reasons, scholars such as Karen Sonik recall that "emotions are socially and culturally mediated *as well as* biologically influenced," and so there are cultural as well as biological explanations that should be taken into account.[29] In what follows we focus on the social and cultural aspects,[30] as in our view they help us to better understand why it is the mother rather than the father, and a goddess rather than a god, who reacts by crying. This pattern is also present in other baby incantations in which it is usually the female characters, rather than the male ones, who shed tears in reaction to the tears of the baby.[31] Significantly, it is only

[29] Karen Sonik, "Emotion and the Ancient Arts: Visualizing, Materializing, and Producing States of Being," in *Visualizing Emotions in the Ancient near East*, ed. Sara Kipfer (Fribourg / Göttingen: Academic Press / Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 223 (Italics of the quotation added by the author). Cf. Ulrike Steinert, "Pounding Hearts and Burning Livers: The 'Sentimental Body' In Mesopotamian Medicine and Literature," in *The Expression of Emotions in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia*, ed. Shih-Wei Hsu and Jaume Llop Raduà (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2021), 410–7.

[30] However, for an approach to both aspects linked to the study of a selection of ancient Near Eastern texts (with an imbalance in favour of the biological approach), see David A. Bosworth, *House of Weeping. The Motif of Tears in Akkadian and Hebrew Prayers* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019). See particularly pp. 3–10 for a presentation of attachment theory, which might be linked to our case study. See also Bosworth, *Infant Weeping*, 10–18 for several biological arguments explaining that crying is essential to babies to elicit caregiving.

[31] Farber, *Schlaf, Kindchen, Schlaf!*, texts 4 and 39. For a translation into English, see Bosworth, *Infant Weeping*, 41–2 and 51 respectively. Farber's text 25 also includes the motif of the tearful mother. However, he did not include the translation, because the lines in question were in poor condition. For a reconstruction of these lines and translation into English of the text, see Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses. An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 2005), 1010. On this link between tears and mothers in these texts, see also Bosworth, *Infant Weeping*, 53.

occasionally linked to a male character of these texts, the father.[32]

In the scenario presented in these texts, we find parents who need help from an expert to soothe their child. Their situation, then, is one of a loss of control, which might be expressed and interpreted in several ways. Tears in this context express stress, frustration, and helplessness.[33] However, they can also express empathy.[34] Consequently, the reaction of the mother in this case encompasses the contradictory feelings habitually experienced by those who have to cope with an infant's incessant crying. On the one hand the distress caused by the situation may lead parents to utter terms of abuse, or at least threats. It is worth noting that although in the Mesopotamian baby incantations there is no abuse, they do contain threats,[35] which might be

[32] See for instance lines 8 and 9 of the text CUNES 52-18-029, translated as follows by its editor: "8-9) You have made the eyes of your father and mother wet with tears." The text has been published in: Wilfred H. Van Soldt, *Middle Babylonian Texts in the Cornell University Collections. I. The Later Kings* (Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 2015), text 448, pp. 524–5. This text has also been translated into Italian in Verderame, "«Perché non dormi bambino?»," text 4, pp. 30–31. Verderame translates these lines as "negli occhi di tuo padre e tua madre hai messo lacrime." On the exceptional nature of the link between men and tears, in this case discussing the episode of Gilgameš mourning Enkidu, see also Agnès Garcia-Ventura, "Shaping Gender, Shaping Emotions: On the Mutual Construction of Gender Identities and Emotional Roles in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *The Expression of Emotions in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia*, ed. Shih-Wei Hsu and Jaume Llop Raduà (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2021), 228–233. Cf. Sonik, "Emotion and the Ancient Arts," 219–23.

[33] For different approaches to this feeling of loss of control, channelled through tears, as expressed in these texts, see for instance Bosworth, *Infant Weeping*, 34; Heffron, "Revisiting 'Noise'," 88; Verderame, "«Perché non dormi bambino?»," 28.

[34] Bosworth, *Infant Weeping*, 34.

[35] Verderame, "«Perché non dormi bambino?»," 25–26.

interpreted as the prelude to abuse.[36] On the other hand, the realisation that the child's crying indicates suffering might elicit an empathetic reaction from the caregiver. In fact, the sight of tears and the noise of the crying encourage the mother to tend to her child and provide support and aid. All these responses are potentially empathetic. As pointed out above, the crying of the mother might encompass contradictory feelings and choosing one option here (frustration or empathy) to interpret this text, does not seem to us appropriate, because this ambivalence is eloquent enough. However, for an analysis from the point of view of the construction of gender roles, focusing on empathy might shed light to some issues. Therefore, in what follows we concentrate on this feature.

Empathy reflects the ability to share somebody's feelings and emotions, and so it does not admit an individual or individualistic approach. Empathy always presupposes a non-hierarchical relationship with another person. Traditionally, these traits have been associated with the feminine, since certain emotions and feelings are linked very strongly to women and to the construction of femininity.[37] Moreover, tears are among the

[36] Bosworth, *Infant Weeping*, 18–21.

[37] For some more insights into the culturally constructed link between empathy and femininity, see Agnès Garcia-Ventura, "'Agencia' y 'empatía' en los estudios sobre el oriente cuneiforme: reflexiones acerca de su aplicación," in *Dinámicas sociales y roles entre mujeres. Percepciones en grupos de parentesco y espacios domésticos en el oriente antiguo*, ed. Beatriz Noria Serrano (Oxford: Archaeopress, forthcoming 2023).

habitual expressions of empathy.[38] In this scenario, then, tears and empathy are interrelated, and together may also contribute to a certain construction of femininity. We propose that this can be seen in our incantation, where it is not a matter of chance that the mother reacts crying.

This interpretation might work as well in sources from other geographies and chronologies and may help to see how masculinities and femininities have been built across time and space. In this connection, here we highlight two examples, from Greco-Roman antiquity and from the Middle Ages, to ascertain the transversality of certain features linking tears and the construction of femininity. First, the stereotype of women portrayed as emotional and tearful in contrast to rational men is present in the Greco-Roman world. The Greek philosopher Aristotle (fourth century BCE), for instance, in his *History of Animals* (Book VIII, 608b, 9-10) stated that "a wife is more compassionate than a husband and more given to tears." For him, there were several reasons for this: women were considered cooler and moister, and their bodies were considered more permeable than those of men, which meant that they had greater empathetic skills. Moreover, woman's heads were thought to have fewer sutures than those of men, and vapours inside their

[38] For an analysis of this link through a selection of ancient Near Eastern sources, see Irene Sibbing-Plantholt, "Visible Death and Audible Distress: The Personification of Death and Associated Emotions as Inherent Conditions of Life in Akkadian Sources," in *The Expression of Emotions in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia*, ed. Shih-Wei Hsu and Jaume Llop Raduà (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2021), 367–8.

heads turned easily to serum, the material from which tears are formed.[39]

Second, with regard to the link between tears, femininity, and empathy, Irit Ruth Kleiman presents an enlightening conclusion in her study of the role of tears in a text by Chrétien de Troyes, in twelfth-century CE France: "Tears in *Philomena* take the reader directly to the point of encounter between the universal value of empathy for human suffering and culturally conditioned approaches to a woman's place in a social, domestic, or sexual economy."[40] This is even more true when we focus on another layer or variant of the construction of femininity: the social and cultural construction of motherhood.[41] As summarised by Érica Couto-Ferreira in a study of the construction of motherhood in ancient Mesopotamia, what defines a mother as such is the provision of "nurturing, care, protection, counselling, and

[39] In Vingerhoets, *Why only humans weep*, 188.

[40] Irit Ruth Kleiman, "A Sorrowful Song: On Tears in Chrétien De Troyes's Philomena," in *Crying in the Middle Ages. Tears of History*, ed. Elina Gertsman (London / New York: Routledge, 2012), 225.

[41] For the assimilation of the construction of motherhood with that of femininity in ancient Mesopotamian literary texts, with a particular focus on the Gilgameš Epic, see Rivkah Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia: The Gilgamesh Epic and Other Ancient Literature* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 119–28. For an overview of feminine characters in Sumerian and in Akkadian literature, with an emphasis on the role of motherhood (or its absence) in their construction see, respectively (both with previous references): Lluís Feliu, "Retratos y semblanzas: mujeres en la literatura sumeria," in *Las mujeres en el Oriente cuneiforme*, ed. Josué J. Justel and Agnès Garcia-Ventura (Alcalá de Henares: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alcalá, 2018), 117–40; Adelina Millet Albà, "Mujeres y diosas en la literatura acadia," in *Las mujeres en el Oriente cuneiforme*, ed. Josué J. Justel and Agnès Garcia-Ventura (Alcalá de Henares: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alcalá, 2018), 159–95.

love."[42] All these activities, evidently, are non-individualistic: or, at least, they are performed more easily and successfully when approached in this way. In fact, all caregiving activities require empathy and when the degree of empathy is low, or non-existent, the fatigue they cause can easily lead to abuse, as pointed out above.

In addition, Almudena Hernando's proposal regarding individual and relational identity might shed some more light on the issue.[43] Hernando, an archaeologist, posits that we should determine two kinds of identities —individual and relational—, that are present in all of us, and trace the way they are constructed and engendered. She sustains that the two identities have been progressively linked to the masculine (individual) and feminine (relational) spheres, and that this has been done by naturalising the two options. Thus, men are presented as "naturally" tending to be more adventurous and independent, while women are portrayed as taking fewer risks, and being more static and more interested in interpersonal relationships. Only one kind of identity is assigned to each gender, rather than acknowledging the presence of both identities in both, something that Hernando defends through the analysis of case studies in ethnography and also in prehistory. Along these lines, we propose to interpret the

[42] M. Érica Couto-Ferreira, "Being Mothers or Acting (Like) Mothers? Constructing Motherhood in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Women in Antiquity: Real Women across the Ancient World*, ed. Stephanie Lynn Budin and Jean MacIntosh Turfa (London / New York: Routledge, 2016), 32.

[43] Almudena Hernando, *The Fantasy of Individuality: On the Sociohistorical Construction of the Modern Subject* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017).

reaction of the mother who starts to cry as linked to relational identity, and consequently, as noted above, a reaction more to be expected in a woman.

Last but not least, and along these lines as well, it is worth recalling that one of the consequences of crying is social interaction – through activities with a high degree of sensorial communication between the mother and the baby, such as caresses, kind words, or back and forth movements to soothe the baby's crying.[44] Although in this incantation no reference is made to these physical relations between mother and child, it is worth mentioning that the solution to the crying involves the sense of touch. Lines 17-21 explain that the recitation of the incantation is accompanied by rubbing bread all over the baby's body. Besides the role of bread as food,[45] the bodily dimension of the activity is interesting. It is the contact between skin and bread that helps to quieten the crying, revolving around the idea that baby's crying diminishes with physical contact.[46]

[44] Garcia-Ventura and López-Bertran, "Soundscapes and taskscapes in the ancient Near East", 114.

[45] For the relevance of bread in nutrition in the ancient Near Eastern milieu, see Francesca Balossi and Lucia Mori, "Bread, Baking Moulds and Related Cooking Techniques in the Ancient near East." *Food & History* 12 (2014).

[46] On the rubbing of bread in funerary rituals, as well as in incantations like the one here under analysis, see Dina Katz, "Sumerian Funerary Rituals in Context," *in Performing Death: Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient near East and Mediterranean*, ed. Nicola Laneri (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2007), 168 and 178.

A busy mother

The tenth and eleventh lines of the text read "Let his father lie down to get the rest of his sleep; Let his mother, who has her chores to do, get her chores done."[47] Here it is explicitly stated that the incessant crying of the baby not only causes upset and stress, but also alters the everyday life of the caregivers. The scene in this case takes place at night; this is why it is said that the father cannot sleep. However, it is noticeable that, even at night, while the father is supposed to rest, the mother is supposed to be doing her chores. This motif is reiterated in other baby incantations, where the father is angry because his sleep has been disturbed and the mother is described as being unable to lead a normal life and do her chores.[48] Tellingly, the motif of the mother's sleeplessness, and thus of her need to rest, is less frequent in these texts.[49]

The contrast between the situations of the father and the mother may respond to the articulation of time in relation to the tasks that each one performs. The time of the tasks of the father is linear and accumulative, with a working day that begins and

[47] Farber, *Schlaf, Kindchen, Schlaf!*, 99 translated these lines as "Sein [Va]ter möge sich niederlegen, seinen Schlaf zu Ende bringen, seine [Mutt]er, die (viel) zu tun hat, möge ihre Arbeit zu Ende bringen!". Hecker, "Rituale und Beschwörungen," 107 as "damit sein Vater sich hinlegen und seinen Schlaf beenden (und) seine mit Arbeit beschäftigte Mutter ihre Arbeit beenden kann".

[48] Farber, *Schlaf, Kindchen, Schlaf!*, texts 4 and 31. For a translation into English, see Bosworth, *Infant Weeping*, 41–2 and 48–9.

[49] See for instance lines 5 and 6 of the text IM 160096, translated as follows by its editors: "À cause de tes crits elle ne peut dormir." "elle" being the mother mentioned in line 4. The text has been published in: Ali Murad and Antoine Cavigneaux, "IM 160096: un charme pour calmer un bébé qui pleure," *Altorientalische Forschungen* 45 (2018): 193–98.

ends. In contrast, the time of the tasks of the mother is cyclic and discontinuous. This fundamental difference between the perceptions and articulations of time of men and women due to the tasks assigned to the sexes appears in several geographies and chronologies, as has been amply analysed from the perspective of gender studies.[50] While tasks linked to the father might fit in the traditional definition of work as a productive and remunerated activity, those linked to the mother are often not considered as productive as they do not create a tangible outcome and, in addition, the work is often unpaid. It does not mean, however, that these tasks were not conceived and defined as work *per se* in the Mesopotamian context, in some cases at least. It should be stressed that the word translated above as "chores" is written in this incantation with the Sumerogram ÉŠ.GÀR (Akkadian *iškaru*), a term for work assignment which does not distinguish either the task or its economic value in terms of retribution.[51]

To define and consolidate the tasks linked with mothers, in the 1990s researchers working in the framework of "engendered archaeologies" in the ancient world coined the term

[50] For a key study, with previous references, see Marina Picazo, "Hearth and Home: The Timing of Maintenance Activities," in *Invisible People and Processes. Writing Gender and Childhood into European Archaeology*, ed. Jenny Moore and Eleanor Scott (London / New York: Leicester University Press, 1997), 59–67.

[51] For the Akkadian term, see the definition provided by the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* (CAD) I sub *iškaru* A, pp. 244–50, particularly entry 1: "work assigned to be performed". One may wonder who it is who has assigned this work to the mother of our text. Here we propose a combination of self-assignment and enviromental (social, cultural) assignment.

"maintenance activities."[52] In a summary article published by Paloma González-Marcén, Sandra Montón-Subías, and Marina Picazo in 2008, assessing the impact of their proposal on the specialised literature, the authors defined maintenance activities as "a set of practices that involve the sustenance, welfare and effective reproduction of all the members of a social group. These comprise the basic tasks of daily life that regulate and stabilise social life. They mainly involve care giving, feeding and food processing, weaving and cloth manufacture, hygiene, public health and healing, socialization of children and the fitting out and organisation of related spaces."[53]

These maintenance activities were (and are) mostly carried out by women and, as they are not organised through formal labour circuits and are unremunerated, they are too often invisible and are not considered as work. Giving them entity and value, and thus integrating them into the very idea of work, is undoubtedly one of the greatest contributions of this new category of analysis. Under this category of analysis it is easier to understand why the mother in this baby incantation is portrayed as busy, at any time of day, unable to rest. According to Picazo, maintenance activities are "day-to-day activities with a routinised character, performed habitually in a continuous way, mostly without an

[52] For an overview, with previous references, of the different research lines and approaches of engendered archaeologies, see Sandra Montón Subías and William Meyer, "Engendered Archaeologies," in *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, ed. Claire Smith (New York: Springer, 2014).
[53] Paloma González-Marcén, Sandra Montón-Subías, and Marina Picazo, "Towards an Archaeology of Maintenance Activities," in *Engendering Social Dynamics: The Archaeology of Maintenance Activities*, ed. Sandra Montón-Subías and Margarita Sánchez Romero (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2008), 3.

evident material outcome (product) or with a product that is quickly consumed."[54] For the people carrying out these tasks the working day has no end. Interestingly, these aspects have also been discussed in our contemporary societies from the perspective of gender studies. A good example of this is the research by Silvia Federici, who highlights how patriarchal systems rely on non-paid labour (mainly performed by women, since it includes gestation, giving birth and caregiving) to maintain a viable structure which envisages payment for certain duties but not for others.[55]

In addition to the explanation presented so far, related to the nature of the tasks presumably carried out by the mother of our texts, there is another aspect that we need to consider in order to understand the insistence on portraying this character as busy all the time. As various literary texts indicate, laziness was frowned upon in Mesopotamia, at least from the ideal of the elites. A good example for the argument discussed here is the Sumerian didactic literature, and more specifically a set of texts dated to the first half of the second millennium BC (ca.1900-1600 BC), the Old Babylonian period, recently analysed and translated

[54] Picazo, "Hearth and Home," 62.

[55] Silvia Federici, *El Patriarcado del Salario. Críticas feministas al Marxismo* (Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 2018). See particularly pp. 30–41. For another example of the application of these frameworks of analysis, see Trinidad Escoriza-Mateu y Pedro Castro Martínez, "Arqueología, Economía, Mujeres y Hombres. Producción de Sujetos y su Mantenimiento en las Sociedades Ágrafas Andinas," *Claroscuro. Revistas del Centro de Estudios sobre Diversidad Cultural*, 11 (2012): 66–82.

into German by Jana Matuszak.[56] In some of these texts, two women converse and insult each other. In others a man speaks of a woman, who is also described in pejorative terms. From a careful reading of these texts, we can infer both the negative and positive models of how a woman should be, particularly in the elite. Many of the topics that appear in these writings are related to the roles of women as wives and mothers, including allusions to their skill and diligence in cooking and weaving (i.e., in maintenance activities). Taking this into account, here we propose that it is no coincidence that the mother of the baby incantation needs to be presented as busy to meet the ideal. When a woman is not busy, she is presented as lazy; there is no middle ground, as can be seen, for instance, in this excerpt from one of the dialogues in an English translation by Matuszak: "(Her) hand is not suited for work: the moment she's begun she already stops, and lets things slide (literally: entering, exiting – it [the unfinished work] is suspended)".[57]

[56] For the *editio princeps* of these texts, see Jana Matuszak, «*Und Du, Du Bist Eine Frau?!*» *Editio Princeps Und Analyse Des Sumerischen Streitgesprächs 'Zwei Frauen B'* (Berlin / Boston: de Gruyter, 2021). For a selection of some of these texts translated into English, see Jana Matuszak, "'She Is Not Fit for Womanhood': The Ideal Housewife According to Sumerian Literary Texts," In *The Role of Women in Work and Society in the Ancient near East*, ed. Brigitte Lion and Cécile Michel (Boston / Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 228–54. Even if these texts are chronologically far removed from our baby incantation, the literary tradition of ancient Mesopotamia and the class and gender ideals transmitted through these texts persist over the millennia. This can be seen in the baby incantations which maintain formulations in the second and in the first millennium BCE. For an analysis of these structures see Farber, "Magic at the Cradle".

[57] Matuszak, "'She is not Fit for Womanhood'," 233.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the mother in these texts is presented as busy: by carrying out her chores, she reinforces an ideal as mother and as woman. Maybe for this reason other baby incantations usually portray the mother as active, something observed for instance by Andrew George when analysing an Old Babylonian baby incantation: "The road of one who does not lie down is a journey in which there is no halt for the night, a suitable image for the mother, who is not only sleepless, like her husband, but active."[58]

To sum up

Through the analysis of a baby incantation, we have sought to explore how motherhood, and by extension femininity, are constructed through the ideas of being tearfulness and busy. With regard to the first topic, the emotional tears of the baby and the mother are analysed through the lenses of proactivity, the emotional bonds, and the senses. Although the reaction of the mother may be explicable in evolutionary and biological terms, the incantation is clearly a cultural solution that we interpret in the light of the Mesopotamian construction of motherhood, based on care, love and protection. In fact, the relational identity we propose here is clearly seen in the transmission process of the incantation, because the effects of the spell, mediated by the exorcist, reach the mother and son after references to two pairs of goddesses and their sons (Ea and Asalluhi, Damu and Gula) in

[58] Andrew R. George, *Mesopotamian Incantations and Related Texts in the Schoyen Collection* (Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 2016), 145.

lines 12 and 13.[59] We claim that this may not be a matter of chance, as the focus is placed on the creation of supporting networks and of parallel scenarios (i.e., on analogy) in order to solve the crisis.

Moving on to the second idea, the incantation revolves around the archetype of the industrious woman. As we have said, laziness was perceived negatively in Mesopotamia. To avoid this negative image, the mother is portrayed as managing a never-ending list of chores, that is, of "maintenance activities" as we propose to label them. These maintenance activities are fundamental in the engendering of proper women; to quote Kristine Garroway in relation to children, "gender does not happen all at once but takes time,"[60] a statement that follows the path of Judith Butler's idea of gender as performance. In the same vein, we have claimed that conformity to the stereotype of the industrious woman and mother is based on continuous and daily practices. Therefore, the construction of motherhood and of femininity described here "does not happen all at once" either.

[59] On Ea and Damu, as well as their sons Asalluhi and Gula respectively, see Frayne and Stuckey, *Handbook of Gods and Goddesses*, s.v.

[60] Kristine Henriksen Garroway, *Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 46. See also pp. 38–40 for the use of gender as performance by Butler referred to here.