



Determining the Gender of the Fetus in Ancient Iraq in Light of Cuneiform Texts

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Abstract:

The excellence of Mesopotamian civilization stems from its historical importance and the cuneiform texts inscribed on clay tablets. These texts encompass every area of life and serve as valuable guides to the interests and cultures of ancient Iraqi society. This study, titled "Determining the Gender of the Fetus in Ancient Iraq in Light of Cuneiform Texts," highlights the Mesopotamian community's interest in the gender of unborn children. This study explores marriage and reproduction's significance in Mesopotamian society and how the sex of male and female fetuses, including twins, was determined. Specialists involved in these determinations used experience and speculation, in addition to visible signs on the pregnant woman's body.

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The Term "Fetus" in Cuneiform Writings:

In the ancient Mesopotamian language, the term for gender referred to a fetus between three to nine months old and was noted as (A-B-GAR-RA) in cuneiform and (kubu) in Akkadian (Al-Jubouri, 2014, p. 488). This term becomes relevant at the early stages of pregnancy, particularly when pregnancy becomes perceptible around the second month. It suggests that the sex of the fetus—male or female—was likely determined around this time. This determination subjected the pregnant woman to the prevailing care regime of the era.

In Arabic, the embryo is referred to as a boy when in the womb and is collectively termed as embryos (Mukhtar As-Sihah). Linguistically, the embryo remains described while in the mother's womb (The Soft Lamp). Termed for its receptivity and exploration, the embryo represents the initial formation of life post-fertilization, which involves the merging of sperm and egg. Growth continues until it starts breathing life, approximately four months into the pregnancy, in alignment with modern medical opinion (Muscati, 2002). These definitions show a close agreement between ancient understandings of the embryo and modern medicine, indicating significant scientific progress in ancient Iraq despite the lack of modern technology.

Given the aforementioned definitions, a comprehensive understanding of a fetus suggests it is an organism created post-fertilization resulting from sexual intercourse between a man and a woman, with

its sex discernible by the third month of pregnancy, a belief consistent in both ancient and modern Mesopotamian worlds.

A Brief Overview of the Importance of Marriage and Childbearing for Ancient Iraqis:

To understand the methods for determining the fetus's sex, it's essential to appreciate the significance of marriage and childbearing in ancient Iraq. Cuneiform texts, especially literary ones, contain significant content related to marriage (Al-Khalidi, 2012, p. 15). They emphasize choosing a good partner and defining marital duties, depicting marriage as an absolute necessity for forming familial and social ties, influencing future and economic aspects (Al-Ansari, 2003, p. 24). Texts indicate a preference for marrying young, as in "May all your daughters marry and your wife remain healthy and behave." Marrying too young was frowned upon, as reflected in "I do not marry a three-year-old girl like a donkey" (Al-Ahmad, 1978, p. 341).

In ancient Iraq, marriage went through several stages. The girl's father or, if she was orphaned, the girl herself received proposals. Engagement involved holy oil ceremonies and official proceedings, culminating in a marriage contract. This contract, mirroring modern practices, named spouses, recorded dowries, witness names, contract dates, and included pledges to their gods, sealed by both parties (Al-Mundhari, 1998, pp. 39-46). Legal texts helped regulate marital relationships, promoting marriage (Rashid, 1973, p. 25).

A preference for twins is recorded, aiming for children with good strength, seen as divine decisions (Gordon, 1960, p. 131; Jacobson, 1980, p. 147). Ancient Iraqis prepared extensively to protect their unborn children, enforcing legal articles against abortion and emphasizing the necessity of growing offspring (Hammoud, 1991, p. 28).

A critical question arises: Why did ancient Iraq stress childbearing? For the Iraqis, childbearing held mundane and afterworld implications. Worldly aspects included family financial support and care for aging parents. Childbearing ensured familial name continuity, inheritance, and avoided property transfer through adoption (Johns, p. 121). Religious texts suggest those with more than three children were happier in the afterlife, enjoying ritual sacrifices performed by offspring, securing posthumous happiness (Kramer, 1971, p. 62; Bayliss, 1973, p. 117; Botero, 1970, p. 131).

In summary, ancient Iraqi society encouraged early marriage and childbearing due to significant impacts on both worldly and eschatological realms, prioritizing special care for pregnant women.

Male Gender Identification:

The cuneiform texts available to us provide several signs and phenomena through which the sex of a fetus, whether male or female, could be determined in ancient times. Interestingly, the process did not involve any specific medical devices but relied on observing particular changes in a woman's body to diagnose the fetus's gender. I have classified the findings based on the gender mentioned in the texts, with the first section focused on males.

One of the earliest signs of determining male sex is mentioned as follows: "If the forehead of the future mother during her pregnancy is yellow, the child she carries is a male" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 137). From this text, it is evident that a yellowish complexion on the mother's face was an early method to diagnose the type of fetus. In another text, male sex determination is linked to a red spot appearing on the woman's face, though this indicates the fetus will die: "If the spot is red, the fetus she carries will be male and will die" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 127). The text does not specify the exact location of the red spot, leaving open the question of why its appearance was linked to death. The color red had a dual meaning: while it was used to repel evil spirits and prevent envy and demons, it also symbolized death (Al-Adhami, 2002, p. 8).

Another belief in ancient Iraqi thought for identifying a male fetus involved the appearance of a birthmark on the expectant mother's forehead: "If the forehead is covered by a birthmark, the embryo she carries will be a male" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 137). Conversely, if the pregnant woman's forehead was free of a

birthmark, the fetus was considered male too: "If it is covered by the birthmark, the embryo she carries will be a son" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 127).

Other methods included observing swollen areas or discolorations on the woman's body. If the woman's forehead showed signs of swelling, it was believed to indicate a male fetus: "If the left of the forehead is swollen, the fetus she carries will be male" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 138). Additionally, if the contact or the appearance of the forehead was red, it suggested a male fetus: "If the forehead contact or the future is red, the fetus she carries will be male" (Labat, 1951, pp. 202-211).

Determining the fetus's sex also involved noticing prominent features on the woman's face and observing changes in her breasts. Sometimes, "dark black" or "red" discolorations were noted as indicators of carrying a child, as in the texts: "If here it is dark black, she is pregnant with a child" and "If its redness is (...) She is pregnant with a boy" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 139; Labat, 1951, p. 209).

Another significant indication was the appearance of distinct black outlines on the woman's breasts—marked by their width—indicating she was pregnant with a boy: "If these lines are black, they cross them accidentally, they are pregnant with a boy" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 143).

The observation wasn't limited to external signs. The text references constricted or inflamed viscera as indicators of carrying a male child: "If her viscera is constricted, she is pregnant with a male" (Biggs, 1968, p. 9), and "If the viscera or the future mother is inflamed, she is pregnant with a boy" (Labat, 1952, p. 208).

Finally, the color of blood, related to muscle or bleeding, was also considered a sign: "If the bleeding of the future mother is red, she is pregnant with a child" and "If the bleeding of the future mother is purple, she is pregnant with a child" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 142).

Female Gender Identification:

The ancient Iraqis relied on several signs or phenomena to diagnose the sex of a female fetus. These signs were identified through changes in the mother's face, breast, body size, infections, and muscle movements, although not all diagnostic texts provided full details on the precise locations of these observations.

One way to identify a female fetus was the appearance of white spots on the mother's forehead, as in this text: "If there is a bright white spot on the forehead of the future mother, the embryo she carries will be a girl and she will be rich" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 137). Similarly, a black spot on the forehead indicated a girl: "If the spot is black, the embryo she carries will be a girl and she will live in peace" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 137). Another text mentions that if the woman's forehead is white, the fetus is a girl: "If the touch is white, the embryo she is carrying will be a girl" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 137). Swelling below the forehead also indicated that the woman was pregnant with a girl: "If the area below the forehead is swollen, the embryo carried is a girl."

Due to incomplete texts, some specific locations of signs remain unknown, but generally, if one part of the forehead was white, it indicated a female fetus: "If (...) from her forehead is white, the embryo she carries is a girl" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 138). Additionally, if swelling occurred below the nose, particularly on the left side, it was an indication of a female fetus: "If (...) swollen from the bottom and on the left side, the embryo carried is a girl" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 138).

Another indication of a female fetus was if the woman's face turned red: "If her face is red, the fetus carried is a girl" (Labat, 1952, p. 209). Signs also appeared on the woman's breasts. A red breast indicated a female fetus: "If it is red, she is pregnant with a girl" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 139). Dark or black breasts also indicated a girl: "If the future mother's breast contacts are dark, she is pregnant with a girl" and "If he has openings and his condition is black, she is pregnant with a girl" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 139).

Wide red lines on the top of the breasts were another indicator: "If the future mother's contacts are finished with red outlines that pass at the top of the breast, she is pregnant with a girl" (Al-Badri, 1976, p.

139). Observations also involved the abdomen; a prominently upward abdomen indicated a female fetus: "If it is prominent and heading upwards, she is pregnant with a girl" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 139).

Additionally, the condition of the woman's viscera was considered: "If she is inflamed, she is pregnant with a girl," "If she is huge, she is pregnant with a daughter," and "If her bowels are pointed, she is pregnant with a girl" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 140). The position of the muscles was used as well; protruding muscles towards the epigastrium suggested a girl: "If the muscles of the future mother are protruding towards her epigastrium, she is pregnant with a girl" (Al-Badri, 1967, p. 140). While other texts reference additional signs, incomplete records make it difficult to fully discern all the methods used by ancient practitioners to determine gender.

Identification of Twin Pregnancies and Their Sex:

The ancient Iraqis recognized the possibility of twin pregnancies, and that the sexes of twins might differ. They developed various methods for determining both the presence of twins and their sex. Unfortunately, existing texts offer limited details, but they do provide some insight into twin pregnancies and their identification. With future archaeological discoveries, we may fill these gaps, which have intrigued researchers.

One notable sign was inflammation in the pregnant mother's feet and sides. Such symptoms indicated she was pregnant with twins: "If she is huge and if her feet and sides are inflamed on the right or left, she is pregnant with twins" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 140). Another text hints at using foot weight to determine twin pregnancies, though part of the text is missing: "If [part missing] on the right side, she was heavy-footed, she was pregnant with a boy and a girl" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 141). Additionally, the muscles between the woman's waist and back could indicate twins if they protruded: "If the muscles [part missing] indicate abnormal pregnancy, she is pregnant with twins" (Al-Badri, 1976, p. 141).

Those Responsible for Determining the Sex of the Fetus:

From cuneiform texts and diagnostic records, it is clear that the Baro priest played a role in predicting the future of the pregnant woman, including her health status and whether she could carry the pregnancy to term. Another group responsible for determining the fetus's sex, known by the term "asu," also prepared medicines (Parpola, 1971, p. 14). The Aishibo class, tasked with recording clinical observations, likely contributed to determining the fetus's sex as well (Sigerist, pp. 418-419). Thus, those responsible for determining the sex of the fetus were mainly three groups: the priestly medical class, the practical medical class, and elder women or midwives (Al-Ahmad, 1974, p. 114; Al-Majidi, 1998, p. 152).

Findings:

1. Cuneiform texts and the ancient Rafidani language mention the term "gender," intended for a fetus between three to nine months old, using the term (A-B-GAR-RA) in writing and (kubu) in Akkadian. This indicates that determining fetal sex likely occurred around the third month of pregnancy, both in ancient times and currently.
2. Ancient Iraqis prioritized marriage and childbearing, with cuneiform texts emphasizing the importance of marriage, selecting a good wife, and outlining the roles of husband and wife. Marriage was considered essential for family formation and social ties.
3. Mesopotamian society promoted early marriage due to its significance in life and the afterlife, as well as emphasizing the care of pregnant women.
4. Determining the sex of a fetus in ancient Iraq was based on physical signs observed on the mother's body, such as skin color changes, abdominal shape, and swelling, rather than medical devices. These practices offer insights into gender identification in ancient Iraqi culture.
5. The responsibility for predicting the fetus's gender fell to the Baro priest, who also assessed the pregnant woman's health and potential to carry the pregnancy to term.

6. Another group, akin to modern pharmacists, prepared prescriptions and medicines for pregnant women. The "acebo" medical class recorded observations, contributing to gender determination due to their experience. Experienced adult women and midwives also played roles in identifying fetal sex.
7. Those determining the sex of the fetus came from three primary categories: the priestly medical class, the practical medical class, and midwives or older women.

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