

VESTIGES OF THE PARTURITION CHAIR IN MALTA

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The position adopted by women in childbirth has varied throughout time and locality among both primitive and civilised communities. Different peoples have favoured squatting; or tying the woman to the trunk of a tree or hanging her from a branch by means of a rope passed under the armpits. Others preferred the kneeling posture; sitting on the knees of an assistant who holds the parturient woman around the abdomen; sitting on a semi-circle of stones or on a backless stool or on a birth-chair; or lying down on a bed. The stool as a birth appliance dates at least since the 4th century B.C. (Cyprus). It was still being recommended at the beginning of the 17th century A.D.

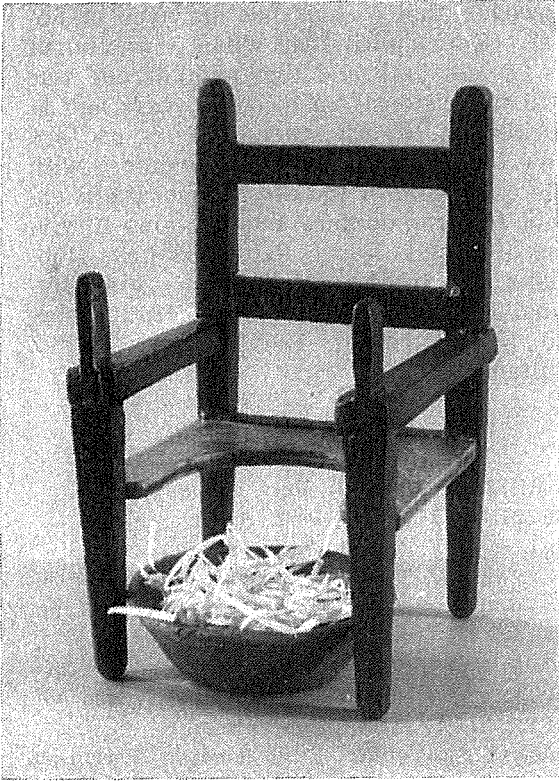
The birth-chair, which was already in use in the 2nd century A.D., survived with modifications to render it more comfortable until the present century (1921) in various parts of the world such as Turkey, Syria, Japan, Egypt, etc (Scarano, 1968; Cope, 1957). The birth-chair differed from an ordinary one in the following features:— (a) the seat was made of wood and had an aperture cut in it in the shape of a horse-shoe; (b) the chair was provided with a back, either fixed or movable, to permit a sitting up or semi-reclining position; and (c) an arm-rest was attached to each side of the seat so that by grasping these rests during her pains the woman was able to strain more effectively during the expulsive stage. A chair in use at Xaghra and Zebbug (Gozo) had a leather belt attached to its back which was brought forward, and fastened over the woman's abdomen to

prevent her from sliding (Bezzina, 1973). The midwife usually seated herself on a low stool, or knelt, in front of the chair to receive the baby while another woman stood at the back of the chair to hold the patient in place (Cianfrani, 1960).

The first attempts to replace the chair by the bed and the lying down position were made in the 17th century by Francois Mauriceau (1637-1709). The bed, in turn, began to be substituted by the delivery table towards the end of the 19th century (Cianfrani, 1960).

The writer has found no trace of the employment of birth-stools in the Maltese Islands but he has come across fragmentary evidence of the use of the parturition chair amongst us. It was called *is-siggu tal-qabla* or *maqghad tal-qabla*.

It is not known when the birth-chair was introduced in the Maltese Islands. It was recognised as an item of the armamentarium of the midwife and obstetrician by the 18th century. Comments on its disadvantages and the best way of constructing it are found in one of Dr. Francesco Butigieg's lectures to medical students in 1804. "Various forms and shapes of labour-chairs (*sedie di travaglio*) called *selle*", he states, "have been devised by obstetricians. Some of them have been found to be uncomfortable, troublesome and dangerous for the patient as they have been responsible for tearing of the vagina and the perineum and are, therefore, to be avoided. Others, however, may be recommended such as that designed by G.W. Stein (1731-1803) and the one produced by



A small scale model of the parturition chair showing two uprights projecting from the arms rests which the woman grasped during her pains to increase the force of the uterine contractions during the expulsive stage of labour. Note also the horse-shoe shaped seat and the earthenware bowl filled with straw underneath the chair.

H. van Deventer (1651-1724) and modified by L. Heister (1683-1785) so that it approaches the shape of that used in the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily". Dr. Butigieg, however, was not quite satisfied with the Neapolitan type of chair and he advocated its modification as the seat was too narrow from side to side so that the woman could not open her thighs wide enough to allow the exit of the baby from the vagina when its head happened to be unduly large, with consequent compression of the infant's skull.

Some of the chairs of Malta were hinged so that they could fold down flat

(*siġġu li jingħalaq*) for easy conveyance by the midwife (Birkirkara); the non-collapsible type was usually carried for her by a boy or young man on his head. From this custom derives the Maltese saying *qrieh ġħax kien iġorr is-sġġu tal-qabla* i.e. he has become bald from carrying the birth-chair (on his head), the implication being that he lost his hair from the constant friction of the chair on his scalp (Zammit, 1966).

As the final expulsive phase of labour approached, a large earthenware bowl (*lembija*) was filled with straw and placed on the floor beneath the chair so that if the baby was not caught in time by the receiving hands of the mid-wife as it came out of the birth canal, it would slip on to the soft straw inside the bowl (Aquilina, 1963).

A variant of the *lembija* custom was the attachment of a kind of drawer underneath the opening of the seat. This drawer was made of strong cloth like a hammock and was pulled out from under the seat to receive the baby during the last pangs of delivery (Sultana, 1964).

In 1852 Dr. G. Clinquant designed an obstetrical bed which could be converted into a birth-chair "adapted to every sort of parturition for the use of lying-in women". He exhibited this apparatus at the Central Hospital, Floriana, where he demonstrated its mechanism to obstetricians and midwives and explained the "facility and comfort by which every manoeuvre" of delivery could be effected (*The Malta Mail*, 1852).

In the eighties of the last century one of the successors of Dr. Butigieg in the Chair of Midwifery in our University did not hesitate to condemn outright the use of the parturition-chair. This was Professor Salvatore Luigi Pisani (1828-1908) who warned midwives against using the chair mainly because, with the patient in a sitting position, the midwife could not maintain adequate flexion of the baby's head by supporting the perineum, allowing the slow escape of the infant's head from the vagina and thus preventing the laceration of the perineum. Owing to this complication the use of the birth or labour

chair by midwives was made illegal by Art. 143, Chapter XIV, of the Police Laws of 1883 (Police Laws, 1883).

It was not easy, however, to convince parturient women to do away with the chair. Indeed as soon as the law prohibited midwives from using it, some families had a chair constructed for their own private use. "Others", wrote Professor Pisani, "delivered their offspring sitting on two chairs approximated to each other while there were some who told the midwife that they would do without her services unless she allowed them to deliver their babies the way they wanted". He exhorted midwives not only to abide by the law in spite of the remonstrations of their clients but also to remove the chair from their homes lest they should be tempted to use it (Pisani, 1883).

In spite of legal sanctions and the endeavours of Professor Pisani, the usage of the chair persisted for many years afterwards. It was still employed at Birkirkara at the beginning of the present century. A ninety-nine year old man, recently deceased, recalled in 1971 that his sixty year old son was born on a parturition chair belonging to the village midwife. A member of another family from the same locality states (1972) that they had their own private chair (Zammit Maempel, 1972).

It seems that the chair began to disappear from the midwifery scene in our Islands after World War I (1914-18). No

specimens have been traced. It is known, however, that a chair had survived at Rabat ((Gozo) until 1942 when it was burnt as useless junk and that another one was still in existence up to some years ago at Birkirkara. Reminiscences of its use are now fading out from folk memory with the extinction of the older generations except for fragmentary recollections surviving at Dingli, Mosta, Rabat (Malta), Floriana, Birkirkara and Rabat (Gozo) (Bezzina, 1973; Zammit Maempel, 1972; Debono, 1964; Sansone, 1964; Calleja, 1964, Sultana, 1964).

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