RESEARCH ARAŞTIRMA

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Infertility in Ancient Western Asia Societies

Eski Batı Asya Toplumlarında İnfertilite

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ABSTRACT Infertility is among humanity's oldest and most universal problems. In the societies of Ancient Western Asia, it was framed not merely as a biological condition but as a multifaceted issue that shaped social order. This study examines how infertility was perceived in Mesopotamian and Anatolian contexts within a cultural-historical framework that spans legal regulations, medical practices, religious beliefs, and social attitudes. Employing a qualitative, comparative, and philological methodology, this analysis examines cuneiform medical and legal texts from Mesopotamia and Anatolia, in conjunction with dictionaries and catalogs, in dialogue with contemporary medical literature. By correlating philological evidence from ancient sources with modern scholarship on reproductive health, the article proposes an original interdisciplinary approach and highlights the historical continuity of concepts, terminology, and practices. Within this approach, infertility is conceptualized as a complex phenomenon extending beyond individual pathology, shaped by social status, moral norms, divine will, ritual practices, and legal principles. Sources are thematically organized under medical, social, and legal headings, and the relationships with fertility, lineage continuity, inheritance, and gender roles are analyzed systematically. The scope covers Old Babylonian, Middle Assyrian, and Hittite legal corpora alongside ritual prescriptions, thereby illuminating the connections between reproductive matters and social organization, legitimacy, domestic authority, and property regimes in antiquity, and providing a comparative basis for discussing analogous perceptions in the modern period.

Keywords: Family; polygamy; infertility; Mesopotamian medicine; social status

ÖZET Kısırlık, insanlığın en eski ve en evrensel sorunları arasında yer almaktadır. Eski Batı Asya toplumlarında, bu olgu sadece biyolojik bir durum olarak değil, toplumsal düzeni şekillendiren çok boyutlu bir mesele olarak ele alınmıştır. Bu çalışma, Mezopotamya ve Anadolu bağlamlarında kısırlığın nasıl algılandığını; hukuki düzenlemeler, tıbbi uygulamalar, dinî inançlar ve toplumsal tutumları kapsayan kültürel-tarihsel bir çerçevede incelemektedir. Niteliksel, karşılaştırmalı ve filolojik bir yöntem benimseyen bu analiz, Mezopotamya ve Anadolu'ya ait tıbbi ve hukuki çivi yazılı metinleri, sözlükler ve kataloglarla birlikte modern tıp literatürüyle karşılaştırmalı olarak ele almaktadır. Antik kaynaklardan elde edilen filolojik verilerin, modern üreme sağlığı araştırmalarıyla ilişkilendirilmesi yoluyla makale, özgün bir disiplinler arası yaklaşım önermekte ve kavram, terminoloji ve uygulamalardaki tarihsel sürekliliği vurgulamaktadır. Bu yaklaşım doğrultusunda kısırlık, bireysel bir patolojinin ötesine geçen; toplumsal statü, ahlaki normlar, tanrısal irade, ritüel uygulamalar ve hukuki ilkeler tarafından şekillendirilen karmaşık bir olgu olarak kavramsallaştırılmaktadır. Kaynaklar tıbbi, toplumsal ve hukuki başlıklar altında tematik olarak sınıflandırılmış; doğurganlık, soy sürekliliği, miras ve cinsiyet rolleriyle olan ilişkiler sistematik biçimde analiz edilmiştir. Çalışma, Eski Babil, Orta Asur ve Hitit hukuk külliyatını ritüel reçetelerle birlikte ele alarak antik dönemde üreme meseleleri ile toplumsal örgütlenme, meşruiyet, aile içi otorite ve mülkiyet rejimleri arasındaki bağlantıları ortaya koymakta ve modern dönemdeki benzer algıların tartışılması için karşılaştırmalı bir zemin sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Aile; çok eşlilik; kısırlık; Mezopotamya tıbbı; toplumsal statü

Infertility is defined as the failure to conceive after 12 months of regular, unprotected sexual intercourse[1] and is currently recognized as a health issue affecting approximately 10-15% of couples of reproductive age.[2] Considering fundamental factors such as lower levels of development and malnutrition in Ancient Western Asian societies, it is likely that infertility affected a greater proportion of the population compared to today. In these patriarchal societies, where the father occupied a central position[3] and re-

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production was regarded as the primary role of women,[4] the inability to have children was perceived as a serious threat to the stability of the family unit. Consequently, families attributed exceptional value to childbirth as a means of ensuring continuity of their lineage.

From the earliest periods of human history, procreation has been essential to human survival. During the Neolithic period, the emergence of agriculture, sedentary life, and cyclical patterns of nature led to the veneration of the Great Mother Goddess. Fertility and abundance became associated with female figures such as Inanna and Ninhursag in Sumer, Kubaba in Syria, Kybele in Phrygia, and Hera and Aphrodite in Greece.[5] The perception of women as fertile fields cultivated by men in Sumerian and Babylonian societies reinforced this connection, with plowing frequently serving as a metaphor for sexual intercourse in literature and poetry. This conceptualization, as illustrated in Table 1, led to the characterization of infertile women as "abandoned fields".[6] A similar notion appears in the Qur'an, where Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 223, states: "Your women are a field for you". In Sumerian laments, this metaphor is further concretized in narratives describing the destruction of cities and the disruption of order, where women are portrayed as losing their ability to bear children, animals perish, and lands become barren. Conversely, periods of abundant harvest were associated with fertility, healing, and the birth of healthy children. This is exemplified in a Sumerian incantation:[7]

"iš-pik-ki i-ma-al-lu-u BURU14 KUR SI.SÁ GIG AN.TI.LA ina KUR GÁL.MEŠ MÍ.PEŠ.MEŠ Šà-ŠÀ-ši-na ú-šak-la-la."

"Empty granaries shall be filled; the earth's harvest shall be fruitful; in the land, healings from diseases shall come to pass; pregnant women shall bear their children in due season."[8]

Despite the abundance of symbolic and textual evidence concerning fertility, infertility and its causes, perceptions, and ritual treatments, have received far less scholarly attention. Previous research has focused mainly on fertility cults or the worship of maternal goddesses, leaving the social, medical, and ritual dimensions of infertility relatively underexplored. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by examining how infertility was conceptualized in the medical and ritual texts of ancient Mesopotamia, particularly within the framework of apotropaic and diagnostic practices. By situating infertility at the intersection of theology, medicine, and social order, this research seeks to offer a fresh perspective on the interrelationship between health, gender, and ritual in the Ancient Near East.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study examines the place of infertility recognized as a medical condition in contemporary medical science within the context of Ancient History, adopting an Ancient Western Asia-focused perspective. The primary objective is to assess historical records concerning infertility. Within the scope of this analysis, various legal and textual sources, including the Sumerian Lipit-Ishtar Laws, the Kültepe Tablets, the Nuzi Texts, the Hittite Laws, the Code of Hammurabi, and other written documents, have been meticulously analysed. Based on the data obtained, themes related to infertility have been categorized under main thematic headings. Through this approach, the study aims to present a comprehensive historical framework of perceptions and responses to infertility in Ancient Western Asian societies.

TABLE 1: Women's "Field" in Ancient West Asia description

Source	Text	Reference
Sumer	*"Who will plough my high field?"*	Inanna Holy Marriage[9]
Babylon	*"Farmer, plough my field!"*	ROM 721[10] JCS 29[10]
Jewish literature	*"Choose a good field out of all the land and plant it safely-and you will have children around you"*	Sirach 26:20-21[11]
Torah	*"Because man is the tree of the field"*	Thessniyah 20:19
Qur'an	*"Your women are a field for you, go to your fields as you wish"*	Surah al-Baqarah 223

This study, which did not require ethical committee approval, was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

STUDY DESIGN

The research was conducted using a qualitative design.

RESULTS

MEDICAL EVALUATION OF INFERTILITY IN ANCIENT WESTERN ASIAN SOCIETIES

Causes of Infertility

While contemporary studies indicate that infertility affects both men and women at a similar rate approximately 39% in each case in Mesopotamian societies, the burden of infertility was primarily placed on women.[2] Although modern medicine attributes female infertility primarily to menstrual disorders (32%) and tubal damage (26%), infertility in Ancient Mesopotamia was predominantly understood as a result of supernatural or religious causes.[2]

In Ancient Mesopotamia, fertility was perceived not merely as a biological process but as a phenomenon shaped by divine will. A woman's ability to conceive was attributed to divine intervention, while infertility was sometimes interpreted as a form of divine punishment or a sign of divine displeasure. This belief is exemplified in the medical text BAM 3 240: 69-71, which states: "*If a woman's internal organs receive semen but she does not give birth, this is the wrath of the god.*"[6] This notion is further reinforced by a Mesopotamian woman's prayer to the goddess Ištar: "*May my sin be forgiven; may my transgression be pardoned. Grant me a name and an heir! Let my womb be fruitful*."[12]

Physical Examination Findings

Babylonian prophecies associated a woman's fertility with physical traits, especially the breasts and navel. Variations in breast shape such as pointed, sunken, or elongated forms, or nipples of unusual colours like white, green, or black were seen as signs of infertility. Similarly, a knotted, right-leaning, or unusually high navel was believed to indicate difficulty in conceiving or giving birth.[6]

Infertility Treatment

In the written records from the Babylonian period, various recommendations are provided to assist women who were unable to conceive, offering potential remedies to facilitate childbirth. One such text prescribes the following: "*To impregnate a woman who is unable to bear children: Skin an edible mouse, open its insides, and fill it with myrrh; dry it in the shade, grind it into a fine powder, and mix it with oil. Subsequently, apply this mixture to her vagina, and she shall conceive.*"[6]

The texts refer to a plant known as the "Birth-giving plant (šammu alādi)", which, as illustrated in Table 2, was believed to alleviate infertility and promote pregnancy.[13] Additionally, the legend of King Etana of Kish narrates the king's quest for this plant as a means to find a solution for infertility. This legend highlights that the king did not place the blame for the situation on his wife; instead, he took it upon himself to seek a remedy. This perspective provides insight into the different attitudes towards infertility during that time.[12]

The Assyrian figure Urad-Gula serves as a compelling illustration of the profound reliance on both medicine and magic in addressing personal and societal issues during antiquity, particularly in relation to his wife's infertility.[12] In SAA 10, 294: r 23-29, he articulates his distress regarding this predicament through reproachful expressions. A pertinent excerpt states, "*I visited the temple of Kidmuru and held a feast; yet my wife still shamed me. I have no son, neither dead nor alive for five years*.". These remarks offer critical insight into the individual and societal pressures surrounding fertility challenges in this historical context.[14]

TABLE 2: Fertility plants in Ancient Western Asia[6]

Sequence no	Akkadian name	Description of the plant
1	*šammu alādi*	Grass, hay. An unidentified plant.
2	*imḫur-lim*	A panacea plant. An unidentified plant.
3	*Ankinutu*	A plant
4	*ḫaluppu*	A plant
5	*Atkam*	A plant (CDA/a)[33]
6	*Kamantu*	Henna[34]

In Babylonian fertility practices, amulets were used alongside medicinal herbs. Women facing infertility often turned to magical rituals and amulets to overcome reproductive challenges. This practice is notably illustrated in the Babylonian medical text BAM 3 250, which prescribes the acquisition of silver, gold, iron, and copper. These materials were to be fashioned into a series of 21 talismanic stones, meticulously strung on a linen thread and worn around the neck of women struggling with infertility. The explicit instruction within this text reads: "*Silver, gold, iron, copper, a total of 21 (talisman) stones; these are strung on a linen thread and hung around the neck of a woman who was not pregnant in order for her to get pregnant.*"[6]

The phrase "*Kinūnu belû*" found in pregnancy texts from the Babylonian period was employed in situations where there was a lack of individuals to secure the continuation of the lineage. Metaphorically, it signifies that "*the fire in the hearth has extinguished*".[15] This expression indicates that the inability to bear children was not merely perceived as an individual shortcoming, but rather as a cessation of familial structure and an interruption of lineage continuity.

Male Infertility

The underlying cause of male infertility may be attributed to impotence. In the context of Mesopotamian medical understanding, it is posited that a man experiences a loss of virility perceived as a divine endowment due to the influence of a mystical spell. To address this condition, the SA.Zİ.GA spell ritual is conducted, with the expectation that it will facilitate the man's restoration of virility. The SA.Zİ.GA ritual encompassed not only incantations but also incorporated various herbal remedies and oils, intended for sexual massage applications.[16]

The terminology "*ša rēši*" and "*šūt rēši*" in the prophetic texts from the Old Assyrian and Babylonian Periods is utilized to denote individuals characterized by barrenness or castration.[17] Within this framework, the curse articulated in a prophetic text, "May your semen dry up like a childless *šūt rēši*!" serves to define the term *šūt rēši* as signifying a barren individual.[18]

SOCIAL AND LEGAL EVALUATION OF INFERTILITY IN ANCIENT WESTERN ASIAN SOCIETIES

In Ancient Western Asian societies, women's main role was to bear children and continue the family line. Infertility was seen as a social failure, jeopardizing both a woman's status and her husband's inheritance. As a result, childless women often faced divorce or had to accept a second wife. Once the new wife bore children, the first wife was often excluded from the household, losing social status, financial security, and inheritance rights.[19]

In this section of the study, the social and legal dimensions of infertility are explored, and the examined texts have been systematically classified and organized according to specific thematic categories. This classification is delineated under the following headings:

1. Accepting a Second Wife
2. Divorce
3. Eviction, Sale for Money

1. Accepting a Second Wife

In Ancient Western Asian societies, polygamy was commonly practiced to secure lineage through childbearing. The high value placed on offspring as social capital and the impact of ongoing warfare contributed to this custom,[20] as larger families were seen as sources of security and sociopolitical strength.

In Old Babylonian texts, the first wife is denoted by the term *ḫīrtu (*CAD/ḫ) while in Sumerian nomenclature, according to the *Lipit-Ištar* legal code, the equivalent terminology is *dam nitadam*, which translates to "chosen wife" or "first wife".[21] The secondary wife is referred to as *šanîtu* (CDA//š) sand within the framework of the *Lipit-Ištar* laws, it is articulated as *dam.2.kam.ma*, meaning "second wife".[15,22] Furthermore, these texts also reference priestesses designated as *šugîtum* (CAD/š) and *qadištum* (CDA/q, CAD/q) alongside female slaves identified as *esirtu*. (CAD/e) Such women were frequently regarded as secondary wives, primarily favored for the purpose of procreation.[23-25] These terminologies provide critical insights into the marital social structure, the status of women, and fertility dynamics prevalent in Old Babylonian society.

The Sumerians prioritized family structure, with procreation playing a central role. Records show that men had extramarital relationships, regulated by law. The Lipit Ištar Laws allowed a man to father children with another woman if his wife was infertile. Although her children had full inheritance rights, she herself was not allowed to reside in the same household as the first wife.[26]

The Nuzi texts reveal the complexities of marriage and reproduction in Ancient Mesopotamia, especially alternative arrangements for infertile women. For example, taking a woman from Lulubi as a wife meant her children were under the authority of the first wife, suggesting the second wife held concubine status or a lesser social rank.[15]

The second wife invariably held a lower status than the first. This hierarchical distinction is most explicitly demonstrated in the Code of Hammurabi, which states: Article 145*:* "*If a man marries a nadītum (priestess) and she is unable to bear children, and if he then decides to marry another priestess who is also childless, that man shall indeed take the childless priestess as his wife. He shall bring her into his household. However, he shall not consider the childless priestess as equal to the first.*"[27]

The ICK I, No. 3 text, which concerns the marriage between an Anatolian woman and an Assyrian man, provides significant insights into the issue of taking a second wife while the marriage is still in effect. In the marriage contract between *Lāqipum* and Hatala, it was explicitly stipulated that *Lāqipum* was not permitted to marry a second woman in Anatolia. However, he was allowed to marry a woman of the *qadištum* status in Assyria. Fertility was established as a fundamental condition of the marriage, and it was stated that if Hatala failed to bear a child within two years, he was required to purchase another woman. Upon the birth of a child from this secondary woman, Hatala would retain the right to sell her.

"1-3 *Laqēpum married Hatala, the daughter of Eniš(a)ru.*

3-5 *Laqēpum shall not marry another aššutum-wife in Anatolia.*

6-7 *In the city (of Aššur), he may marry a qadištum.*

7-9 *If, within 2 years, she does not provide him with descendants,*

10-11 *she herself shall buy a female slave,*

12-14 *and later, after having a baby,*

15-16 *she may sell her! where she! wishes.*[28,29]

The text PRAG I, No. 490 provides significant insights into marriage practices during the Old Assyrian Period and exhibits notable similarities with the ICK I, No. 3 document in terms of subject matter. According to the text, if Ištar-lamassī failed to bear a child within three years, Puzur-Ištar was granted permission to purchase a female slave (*amtum*) and marry her.

18-20 *If, within 3 years, Ištar-lamassī does not see a baby,*

21-22 *he may buy a female slave and take her (for procreation).*

22-24 *Aššur-nemēdi, Anīna, and her mother gave her (as wife)*

25-28 *In the presence of Annali, son of Āl-ṭāb, and Mannum-balum Aššur, son of Aššur-ṣulūlī*"[28-31]

2. Divorce Status

Under Hammurabi's rule, laws were enacted to preserve family continuity, including specific provisions for infertile women. The Code of Hammurabi defined their rights and roles within marriage. Notably, Article 138 permitted a man to divorce a childless wife, provided he returned her dowry and paid a sum equal to the bride price. The legal provisions state as follows:[27]

Article 138: "*If a man divorces his wife who has borne him no children, he shall pay her the equivalent of her bride price in silver. Additionally, he shall return in full the dowry that she brought from her father's house.*"

Article 139: "*If there was no bride price, he shall pay her one mina of silver as compensation for the divorce.*"

Article 140: "*If she belongs to the second class, he shall pay her one-third of a mina of silver.*"

However, the Assyrians adopted a different approach to this issue. In Assyrian law, a notable prac-

tice was the requirement for a childless wife to consent to her husband taking a second wife.[32] This distinction highlights a fundamental divergence between the legal systems of the two societies in their approaches to marriage, fertility, and domestic order.

3. Eviction, Sale for Money

If both the first wife and the second wife were unable to bear children, they could be divorced and expelled from the household. Despite engaging in marital relations, the second wife could never attain the status of the first wife.

Articles 146 and 147 of the Code of Hammurabi provide valuable insight into family and social structure. When a *nadītum* wife is unable to bear children, she may place a slave woman in her husband's household for the purpose of producing an heir. If this slave woman gives birth, she receives legal protection: she may not be sold, even if she later claims equality with her master. To reinforce her subordinate status, she is required to adopt a distinctive hairstyle similar to that of other servants. However, if the slave woman does not conceive, the husband is permitted to sell her, revealing the precarious and instrumental nature of her position.[27]

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that, in ancient Mesopotamian societies, fertility was regarded not merely as an individual matter but as a fundamental element ensuring the continuity of social order and familial structure. Infertility, therefore, was associated not only with medical concerns but also with social status, religious legitimacy, and moral integrity. This perspective reveals that infertility was perceived not as a personal health problem but as a condition capable of disrupting both social and religious order.

When compared with modern literature, it becomes evident that certain aspects of ancient approaches parallel contemporary notions of holistic health. Today, infertility is examined through a multidisciplinary lens that encompasses biological, psychological, and social factors.[9] In Mesopotamian societies, however, this holistic understanding emerged intuitively, through the combined use of religious rituals, medical prescriptions, and social regulations, without the conceptual framework of modern science. This demonstrates the presence of a multifaceted relationship between health, the body, and the natural world in early civilizations.

This study approaches ancient medical and ritual texts not merely as religious documents but as multifaceted sources reflecting the period's health culture, gender roles, and moral values. In doing so, it elucidates how infertility in Mesopotamia was conceptualized across bodily, social, and theological dimensions, and evaluates the interplay between health, gender, and belief within a historical context. This approach provides an analytical framework that interprets ancient Near Eastern conceptions of health through cultural, spiritual, and social dimensions.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that infertility in ancient Mesopotamia was perceived as a multidimensional phenomenon closely linked to social order, moral structure, and divine will. The combined analysis of ritual, medical, and legal sources reveals that reproductive capacity played a decisive role in shaping identity, status, and social hierarchy, particularly generating significant social consequences for women within patriarchal structures.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its treatment of infertility not merely as a biological reality but as a culturally constructed condition. By integrating perspectives from the history of medicine, gender studies, and medical anthropology, this interdisciplinary approach expands existing scholarship which has focused mainly on fertility cults and maternal symbolism to highlight the social implications of infertility and the ritual practices developed to address it. For future research, this study underscores the need for further investigation into male infertility and the conceptualization of masculinity within ancient medical thought. In addition, comparative studies across other ancient cultures may further enrich our understanding of reproductive health in antiquity and contribute to a broader historical perspective on fertility, gender, and social identity.

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During this study, no financial or spiritual support was received neither from any pharmaceutical company that has a direct connection with the research subject, nor from a company that provides or produces medical instruments and materials which may negatively affect the evaluation process of this study.

Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest between the authors and / or family members of the scientific and medical committee members or members of the potential conflicts of interest, counseling, expertise, working conditions, share holding and similar situations in any firm.

Authorship Contributions

Idea/Concept: *Aydanur Kocabıçak;* ***Design:*** *Aydanur Kocabıçak, Bülent Diri, Hasan Ali Şahin;* ***Control/Supervision:*** *Aydanur Kocabıçak, Hasan Ali Şahin;* ***Data Collection and/or Processing:*** *Aydanur Kocabıçak;* ***Analysis and/or Interpretation:*** *Aydanur Kocabıçak, Bülent Diri;* ***Literature Review:*** *Aydanur Kocabıçak;* ***Writing the Article:*** *Aydanur Kocabıçak;* ***Critical Review:*** *Aydanur Kocabıçak, Bülent Diri, Hasan Ali Şahin.*

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