

## A Semiotic Approach to the History of Childbirth

*Doğum Eylemi Tarihinin Göstergebilimsel Dili*

Gizem ÇITAK<sup>1</sup>, Merve İNAN<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> BSM, Ass. Prof. Dr, Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Midwifery Department, Tokat 0000-0002-5484-2233

<sup>2</sup> Visual Arts Teacher, Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa Secondary School, Tokat 0000-0002-3972-5979

### ÖZET

**Amaç:** Bu çalışmanın temel amacı, doğum eylemi tarihine ilişkin görsellerin görsel ve anlamsal özelliklerini yorumlamak için göstergebilimsel metodolojiden yararlanmaktır.

**Yöntem:** Çalışmada dilbilimsel ve figüratif bileşenlerden oluşan 'göstergebilimsel metodoloji' kullanılmıştır. Roland Barthes'ın kuramına dayanan bu çalışmada, 1 Aralık 2023 ile 15 Aralık 2023 tarihleri arasında Google görsellerde yer alan görseller düz anlam, yan anlam ve sembolizm gibi kavramlar çerçevesinde değerlendirilmiştir.

**Bulgular:** Göstergebilimsel olarak analiz edilen tüm görsellerde, doğum sırasında kadınların desteklenmesi, güçlendirilmesi ve mahremiyetinin sağlanmasının önemli olduğu belirtilmektedir. Ayrıca özellikle Mısır ve Antik Roma eserleri ebeleri tanrılaştırılmış ve ne kadar önemli bir meslek olduklarını ifade etmiştir.

**Sonuç:** Araştırma sonucumuzda incelenen görsellerin kadının doğum eylemi sırasında ebe tarafından desteklenmesinin önemini vurgulamaktadır. Gelişen teknoloji ile birlikte varlığını artıran doğumda tıbbileşmenin sürekli ebe desteği ile aşılabileceği ve ebelerin bu konuda daha fazla politikaya ihtiyaç duyduğu görülmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Doğum, Ebelik, Göstergebilim, Doğum Eylemi Tarihi.

### ABSTRACT

**Aim:** The primary objective of this study is to utilize semiotic methodology to interpret the visual and semantic features of the images related to the history of childbirth.

**Methods:** 'Semiotic methodology' consisting of linguistic and figurative components was employed in the study. Based on Roland Barthes' theory, the current study evaluated the images available on Google Images from December 1, 2023, to December 15, 2023, within the scope of concepts such as denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and symbolism.

**Results:** In all the images analyzed semiotically, it is stated that it is important to support, empower and ensure the privacy of women during childbirth. In addition, especially Egyptian and Ancient Roman artifacts deified midwives and expressed how important a profession they are.

**Conclusion:** The visuals analyzed in our research emphasize the importance of the midwife's support during the woman's labor. It is seen that medicalization in childbirth, which increases its presence with developing technology, can be overcome with continuous midwife support and midwives need more policies in this regard.

**Keywords:** Childbirth, Midwifery, Semiotics, The History of Childbirth.

### Sorumlu yazar:

Gizem ÇITAK, Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Midwifery Department, Tokat, Turkey, gizem.citak@gop.edu.tr

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## INTRODUCTION

Semiotics aims to analyze the meaning. What immediately springs to mind are the issues of revealing abstract conditions such as its formation and creation. In this respect, everything related to meaning belongs to the field of semiotics (1). It refers to the analysis of texts, whether specific to a culture or not. Everything that pertains to the semiotics is texts. They range from a musical notation to a painting, an advertising poster to culturally specific behaviors, a movie to a play, and a poem to a novel. Texts enable the systematic analysis of signs, leading to the exploration of the deeper level of meaning. Semiotics, which focuses on the meaning beyond the apparent, deconstructs meaning and reconstructs it through myths, metaphors, and codes. (2).

A broad range of disciplines, including mythology and historical works, have addressed the concept of childbirth. Numerous birthing figures exist, such as the Venus of Willendorf, one of the most famous artifacts dated to the Paleolithic period, a pregnant woman figure found in the Neolithic Site of Catalhöyük, and the statue of Artemis (3). Additionally, examples can also be found at Göbeklitepe in our country. The concept of childbirth, which has a significant place in history, is directly linked to the midwifery profession that centers on women (4).

Diverse records exist describing childbirth experiences from various cultures and periods. It is reported that childbirth was generally deemed sacred in ancient civilizations; thus, specific environments were designed for labor. Birthing chairs and some types of birthing stools utilized to facilitate vaginal delivery were also illustrated (5). Carvings and drawings dating from ancient Egypt to recent centuries depicted women giving birth in a variety of positions, such as standing, squatting, kneeling, and sitting. During delivery, women prioritized their beliefs in magic, prayer, charm, and offerings and sought assistance from female deities. In the Ancient Age, it was rather typical practice to use amulets with different appearances and distinct effects for pregnancy and labor (6).

The first record of cesarean delivery in history is believed to belong to the Sumerians in 2000 BC. In ancient Greek religion and mythology, Asclepius, regarded as a hero and the god of medicine, is depicted as being taken out of his dying mother's womb by his father, Apollo (7). One of the early illustrations concerning the cesarean operation is an engraving portraying the birth of Julius Caesar from his deceased mother (8).

Even though numerous books deal extensively with the history of childbirth and many related images are utilized, no research has used the semiotic approach to examine the concept. In

this respect, the images about the history of childbirth found in social media, books, and the Internet were evaluated in the research to explain them as semantic concepts.

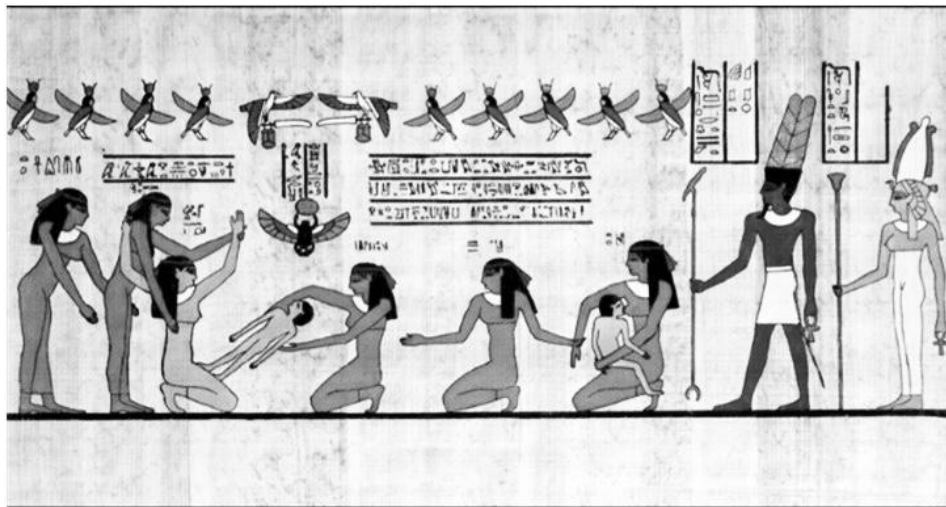
## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Semiotic methodology consisting of linguistic and figurative components was employed in the study. Based on the theory of Roland Barthes, this study evaluated the images available on Google Images from December 1, 2023, to December 15, 2023, within the scope of concepts such as denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and symbolism. In semiotics, the denotative meaning is objective and explicit, whereas the connotative meaning refers to further meanings ascribed to the sign due to its function and form.

In order to determine the content validity of the pictures, the 50 pictures obtained were presented to 20 experts. The experts were reached via e-mail and all of them (20 midwife academicians) were returned. Davis technique (1992) was used in the content validity based on expert opinions. The experts were asked to evaluate the pictures by giving each picture a score between 1-4. The scores given by the experts to the pictures whose content validity was evaluated in this way were considered to be sufficient in terms of content validity if the content validity index was greater than 0.80 according to the Davis technique. After this application, a total of 6 pictures were determined to be within the scope.

## FINDINGS

The research consisted of six images related to the history of childbirth. They were gathered under the headings of society's perception of childbirth and its associated challenges.



**Image 1: Childbirth in Ancient Egypt (9).**

**Overall Depiction:** Eight adult and two infant figures are noticed. Labor is depicted in ancient Egypt. The illustration shows a woman giving birth with her maids by her side. What attracts attention is Amon, known as the first and god of all gods, eyeing the labor. The first figure on the right is Mut, the mother goddess and the wife of Amon. In ancient Egypt, Mut was thought to be the mother of all things.

**Table 1: Childbirth in Ancient Egypt**

Signifier	Signified	Sign	Meaning
<b>Woman 1</b>	She stands on the left in the first row, slightly leaning forward with her hands extended forward.	Her stance clarifies that she attempts to aid the woman before her.	As is evident from their overall depiction, all figures are arranged to assist childbirth.
<b>Woman 2</b>	This female figure can be seen in the second row on the left, lifting the other figure's arm with her left hand while using her right hand to touch her back.	She helps the woman in labor before her.	Assistance is provided during labor.
<b>Woman 3</b>	This female figure kneels in the third row on the left, and the figure behind her holds up her right hand.	It is highlighted that this figure, exhibiting a different sitting position, has just delivered a baby.	Her stance and the baby figure being delivered between her legs create the impression of the moment of childbirth. It is noticed that she is the person giving birth.
<b>Woman 4</b>	The fourth female figure on the left sits on her knees and holds the newborn with both hands.	She assists with childbirth.	This figure's posture and position regarding others give rise to the impression that she helps with childbirth.
<b>Woman 5</b>	The female figure positioned in the fifth row on the left sits on her knees with her arms spread wide.	Based on her posture, she appears to be giving the newborn baby from hand to hand.	It is evident that assistance is provided during delivery.
<b>Woman 6</b>	The female figure in the third row from the right sits on her knees, hugging the baby in her lap.	Unlike the other figures, it is seen that the woman takes care of the newborn baby on her lap and breastfeeding it.	It appears that she cares about the newborn baby.
<b>Woman 7</b>	She is the female figure positioned in the first row from the right with blonde hair. She has a double crown on her head, a staff in her right hand, and the key of life (ankh) in her left hand.	Her feminine posture and attire make it clear that she is the mother goddess.	She has a bare breast, which represents motherhood.
<b>Man</b>	He is the male figure with one foot in front and one foot behind in the second row from the right. He holds a staff in his right hand and the key of life (ankh) in his left hand.	This figure, unlike others, stands out as a god, as evident from his attire.	His position indicates that he is God.
<b>Baby 1</b>	It is the baby figure in the fourth row from the left with an upright posture.	As can be seen from its posture, it has just been born.	Labor is depicted.
<b>Baby 2</b>	The baby figure is on the woman's lap in the third row from the right. It nurses while its hand is left hanging downward freely.	Its nursing indicates that the newborn is meeting its physiological needs.	A meaning regarding afterbirth is encountered.



**Image 2: Woman Giving Birth in Egypt (With Hathor's Assistance), the Temple of Dendera (10).**

**Overall Depiction:** A female figure is seen in the middle, kneeling to give birth. The goddess Hathor is depicted assisting the woman on the right and left. She is the goddess associated with childbirth and fertility in Egyptian mythology. She is portrayed as a cow with milk flowing from her breasts and as a figure aiding the woman in labor.

**Table 2: Woman Giving Birth in Egypt (With Hathor's Assistance)**

Signifier	Signified	Sign	Meaning
<b>Hathor 1</b>	She is the cow-faced figure on the right, holding the arm of the woman beside, with one hand down and the other touching her back.	The goddess assists the birth, as seen from her posture and gestures. The fact that her breast is bare symbolizes her femininity.	Help is provided to the woman in labor.
<b>Hathor 2</b>	The cow-faced figure on the left holds the figure in the middle with both hands.	The goddess Hathor's assistance to the woman in labor with her bare breast is another sign of her femininity.	Help is provided to the woman in labor.
<b>Woman</b>	She is the female figure squatting between Hathor figures, trying to extend her legs with both arms.	Her breasts indicate the female identity of the figure, and her position suggests that she is in labor.	She is clearly in labor based on her posture.



**Image 3:** Childbirth in Ancient Rome and Midwife Providing Assistance (11).

**Overall Depiction:** Childbirth in Rome is displayed. Two adults and a baby figure are seen in the illustration. With her legs spread wide, the woman in the bed denotes the moment of childbirth. The figure standing opposite the other in labor is depicted as the midwife assisting the labor.

**Table 3: Childbirth in Ancient Rome and Midwife Providing Assistance**

Signifier	Signified	Sign	Meaning
<b>Woman 1</b>	On the right, a female figure whose hair is in a bun and sitting on a stool holds a baby on her lap.	As apparent from the baby on her lap and the opposite woman's posture, she is the midwife who managed the labor.	The woman's posture indicates that she is the midwife assisting in childbirth.
<b>Woman 2</b>	She is the naked woman who is on the left in the reclining position and whose legs are spread wide with her right foot on the ground and the left one raised. She touches her leg with her left arm while leaning on her right arm.	As can be understood from her position, she is the one in labor.	That the labor happens is evident from her position.
<b>Baby</b>	The figure is in the fetal position between two female figures.	A baby that has just been born is displayed. The infant's posture makes it clear that it is a newborn.	Labor has just ended.



**Image 4: The birth of Esau and Jacob, 1475-1480 (12).**

**Overall Depiction:** It shows four adult and two infant figures. People aiding the woman who is in labor are noticed. The woman's screaming facial expression is what draws attention.

**Table 4: The Birth of Esau and Jacob, 1475-1480**

Signifier	Signified	Sign	Meaning
<b>Woman 1</b>	A female figure wearing a red dress and a white headscarf is seen squatting and gripping the ceiling-hung rope with her hands while yelling.	The expression on the woman's face in the middle of the illustration suggests that she is hurt and struggles to deliver the baby.	Labor is depicted.
<b>Woman 2</b>	She is the long-haired female figure in a blue dress. She hugs the woman in labor with her left hand.	The woman's posture indicates she supports the woman in labor by embracing her.	She aids the labor.
<b>Woman 3</b>	She is the female figure with a baby on her lap and wearing a gray dress and headscarf.	She is one of the women aiding labor in the picture's background. She wraps and cradles the baby that has just been born.	Labor is depicted.
<b>Woman 4</b>	She is the female character with a purple dress and a white headscarf sitting on a stool on the right. She pulls the baby out.	As can be understood from the woman's position in the picture, she is managing the delivery.	With her posture and position, she depicts the labor.
<b>Babies</b>	The first baby is positioned between its mother and the woman managing childbirth, while the second baby figure is seen naked, held by the other woman assisting.	It is assumed that of the two babies, one comes out of the mother's womb, while the other appears to have been born a few minutes earlier.	Labor is observed.





**Image 6: Şükran Moral, Speculum, 1996 (14).**

**Overall Depiction:** The artist unprotectedly mirrors her femininity and vagina, which is her most intimate organ. It portrays the violated privacy of the woman and the state, causing her to feel humiliated during labor at the gynecological examination table.

**Table 6: Şükran Moral, Speculum, 1996**

Signifier	Signified	Sign	Meaning
<b>Woman</b>	A female figure with her legs spreading wide is seen lying on a gynecological examination table. A monitor is also placed between his legs.	This monitor appears to have been placed to suggest that the vagina resting on the gynecology table is prepared to talk.	It is implied that the woman's sense of privacy is jeopardized because of the gynecological examination table used during labor.

## DISCUSSION

The first three images depict the labor in Ancient Egypt and Ancient Rome. It was pointed out that during childbirth, a woman can deliver the baby not only in the reclining position but also in the kneeling position, and she should not be left alone at this stage. For millions of years, women have given birth through vaginal delivery. With adequate support and appropriate intervention, childbirth can be performed successfully (15). Upon the hospital healthcare providers' preference, several women give birth these days while lying on their backs or in the semi-reclining position. However, this scenario renders the woman who will actively participate in labor passive. The philosophy of active childbirth emphasizes that the most suitable labor positions are the ones that do not put pressure on blood vessels and do not

restrict movement. It also underlines the various positions, such as standing, walking, kneeling, sitting, or squatting, that allow the pelvis to be fully mobile and the body to work harmoniously with gravity. The studies conducted on the effect of a woman's position on labor revealed that upright positions encourage women and shorten the labor duration (16, 17). As public hospitals have adjusted to mother-friendly hospital standards, the concept of 'freedom of movement' throughout labor has regained significance in the modern era. According to recent studies, women use squatting, standing, and semi-reclining positions during the first stage of labor. Research is still ongoing to determine the level of evidence for these practices.

The woman in the fourth image is described as being in pain and needing assistance during labor. A woman in labor needs another person's support (18, 19). This support is the continuous support that is provided from the pregnant mother's arrival at the hospital until the birth (20). In most cultures throughout history, women were assisted by friends, family, and other relatives during pregnancy and labor. It was found that the duration of the active phase, the need to increase oxytocin, the intensity of pain, and the cesarean delivery rate of women receiving continuous support decreased. In contrast, mother's satisfaction with their birth experience increased (21). A study conducted with women who received support during labor reported a shorter duration of the active phase of labor and higher satisfaction with childbirth (22). Another research also revealed that women were pleased with the support they received during childbirth (23). As a matter of fact, the fourth image highlighted this point.

The fifth image depicts a grieving woman who has lost her baby. Following the loss experienced during pregnancy and labor, women lose their confidence in their genes and bodies, as well as their maternal roles and pregnancy status (24, 25). Loss can frequently lead to intense emotional (spiritual) reactions such as grief and depression (26). A qualitative study was conducted with the midwives in Australia on their experiences related to perinatal loss, self-confidence, and satisfaction. It was pointed out that midwifery studies on this topic are scarce and must be expanded. Another study stressed supportive care, flexibility, responding to women's individual needs, facilitating understanding, creating special memories, listening, and sharing grief in a satisfactory midwifery care model for women experiencing baby loss (27).

In the sixth image, the gynecological examination table reflects the femininity and erotic quality of the women. Further, it demonstrates women's violated privacy and their emotional state of feeling humiliated during labor. The individual's feeling secure and free depends on

protecting their personal space. The privacy and protection of this space comfort the person and ease communication with others. Women are faced with the risk of loss of privacy since their bodies are greatly exposed. According to the studies, intrapartum care services should provide patient-centered decisions and information, and privacy and confidentiality should be ensured. Moreover, it was noted that women voice their displeasure at having strangers and unwanted people around them (28, 29). Yücel et al. (2021) remarked that women having a vaginal delivery are more uneasy exposing their intimate organs than those having a cesarean delivery (30). Furthermore, in the qualitative study of Sychareun et al. (2022), women notified that they do not appreciate the lack of privacy and confidentiality in hospitals (31). The significance of these findings lies in the fact that women may not always have a negative experience, yet they run the risk of losing privacy in the delivery room.

## CONCLUSION

Childbirth has maintained its paramount importance for the existence and continuity of humanity up until now. The common message in the examined images is not only about the labor performed but also that women should be assisted, strengthened, and psychologically comforted, not left alone, and their privacy should be protected. Midwives, indispensable caregivers during labor, should approach the women more empathetically, not leave them alone, and support them. The midwifery model, reflected since ancient times, is currently being strengthened through science and evidence-based practices.

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**Author Contributions:** Gizem CİTAK: methodology, conceptualization, writing - original draft, writing - review and editing. Merve İNAN: methodology, conceptualization, formal analysis, writing - review and editing, supervision.

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