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GRANDMOTHERS REBORN.

ALLOMATERNAL CARE AS AN UNCHARTED TERRITORY OF SPANISH HISTORY¹

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In memory of Maria Hainzl, born Schneiderbauer (1921–2005)

Pastor-Serrana: Sant'Ana, su agüela,/ vístele la faxuela,/ bonito, / la gala del Ninyo, chequito,/ bonito. (Diego Sánchez de Badajoz, Farsa del juego de cañas, siglo XVI)

Es war einmal eine kleine süße Dirne, die hatte jedermann lieb, der sie nur ansah, am allerliebsten aber ihre Großmutter, die wusste gar nicht, was sie alles dem Kinde geben sollte. (Gebrüder Grimm, Rotkäppchen)

LONGEVITY

Fairy tales have always known it, yet scholars are only gradually becoming aware of just how closely grandmothers in history are connected to children.

Social history tends to look at a society's most visible and active members, so that age groups at the outer limits of the human life cycle often remain in the shadows. Very young children are seen as passing through an extremely vulnerable and

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precarious stage; there does not seem to be much point in counting on them before they have made it through the bottleneck of their first years of life. What could be said about Mozart's five siblings (five out of seven!) who died before reaching the age of reasoning? By contrast, elderly women are sometimes rashly deemed close to non-existent. How could there be lots of them when so many letters and chronicles report women's death in childbirth or during their childbearing years?²

The first assumption deserves closer scrutiny, the second has already been challenged by scholarly writing. Let us briefly examine both. Subsequently, we will contrast findings from social anthropology with what we know about Spanish social history. The main part of this paper will then be dedicated to the importance of grandmothers in the very earliest days and months of human life.

Longevity is the distinctive feature of the human species, from its earliest history onwards. Recent anthropological writing has highlighted this fact and begun to systematically explore its wider meaning. Human life lasts longer than that of our closest relatives – primates. Moreover, within a common female lifespan, there is a remarkably long period of postmenopausal life. There is strong evidence that in hunter-gatherer societies a considerable part of all women living belonged to this age group of females who had passed beyond their reproductive years³. Social historians, it is true, have already reminded us of this important fact some time ago: an average life expectancy of 20 to 30 years does not necessarily imply the lack of elderly people. On the contrary, those who had the good luck to survive childhood and reach adulthood, stood a good chance of becoming relatively old, and not embarking on Charon's skiff before the age of 60 to 65⁴. High infant mortality thus was the factor which significantly lowered the *average* expectation of lifetime.

Now, this is a fact to be taken into account when assessing grandparents and children. It is not true that most children of past ages only knew their forefathers by hearsay. "Indeed, despite high mortality," Marie-France Morel holds, "they are more present than one would think. About 1800, in France, every child that is born, still possesses more than half of its grandparents."⁵

² This vision was challenged by Vincent Gourdon in his well-documented article that dates back as far as 1999, p. 513 and *passim*. See also Gourdon, 2001.

³ Hawkes, 2006; Hrdy, 2009; Bogin/ Varea, 2017, Harari, 2011, p. 57.

⁴ Bennisar, 1985, p. 376.

⁵ Morel, 2008, p. 139. Translation W.A. See also Gourdon, 1999 and 2001; Chvojka, 2003.



Image 1: Grandmothers and granddaughters embroidering
(Almendral de la Cañada, Toledo, 1963/ Paz Gatell)

CHILD MORTALITY

Much as our present-day emotions and desires revolt against it, we cannot understand past societies without talking about infant mortality. When death bells tolled in 17th century Spain, in more than one out of two cases they tolled for a child that had died before reaching the age of 7⁶. And death rates far higher than this average of around 50% occurred frequently. Inés de Ayala, for example, Spanish royal midwife from 1638 to 1663, lost eight of the 12 children she bore herself before they reached the age of three⁷. Children left at the mercy of foundling homes had little chances to grow up. No wonder, therefore, that in their accounts, administrators of these sinister institutions list baptisms together with funerals, *mantillas* (swaddles) alongside with *mortajas* (shrouds)⁸. Death waylaid children as much as old people (and maybe it is also for this reason that they felt emotionally close to each other). Half of the tombs were children's tombs, coffins were children's coffins, memories of dead relatives in a

⁶ See for example Gómez Martín, 1999, p. 171 and passim; Bennassar, 1999, p. 92, supposes that in 16th century Valladolid and its surrounding towns about half of the children died before reaching their eighth year of life. Spanish parish priests sometimes give numbers. Thus, at the beginning of the 19th century in the town Sotillo de la Adrada (Ávila), one don Juan Jose Rodríguez sums up the burials he had carried out between 1799 and 1803: out of 243 deceased 94 were *cueros mayores* and 139 *párvulos* (Sotillo de la Adrada, parroquia de la Santísima Trinidad, *Libro de difuntos*, 1803–1842, No 28, Sit. Arch. 179/5/2, note on the inside of the first page (online access via FamilySearch). For babies born in a precarious state which prompted the administration of emergency baptism see Aichinger/ Dulmovits, 2020.

⁷ Carlos Varona, 2018, p. 144.

⁸ See Linage, 2012.

good many cases were memories of infants, and nightmares were haunted by the ghosts of little ones⁹. The death of a young child is not merely a sad occurrence, not just another component to be added to a book which aims at containing all aspects of past life. Rather, it was an experience which shaped the whole outlook on and most dealings with life. It impinged on the psychological balance of women and men and on the colour of the clothes they wore; on their perception of time and fate; their memories and expectations; their visions of the world beyond; and: their management of available (human) resources. Myriad art up to the early twentieth century attests to this state of affairs¹⁰. Infant mortality is a social condition to be taken into account when trying to understand the social mechanisms of past communities as a whole.



Image 2: Velatorio of Blanquita who died of typhoid fever
(Ferrol, 1895/Antonio Pérez Garabán)

Where life is a dangerous business and adulthood is no guarantee, survival very much depended on the help of others. *It takes a village to raise a child* and a mother who gets support beyond that (not always) granted by the biological father had better chances to succeed. This is where grandmothers come into the picture. In premodern communities, grandmothers didn't just cuddle infants, read storybooks, teach

⁹ Gélis, 2006, pp. 180-181. A horrible example, which relates the ghost of an infant to maternal infanticide can be found in Heine, 2006, pp. 414-415.

¹⁰ The *Kindertotenlieder* by Gustav Mahler (1901-1904) would be a well-known example. But once you pay attention to the topic, you will come across a surprising number of instances. Surfing freely in time and space, one might look at the Salem witchcraft trials, Massachusetts, 1692 to 1693. There, alleged witchcraft that caused the death of newborns and infants was a major accusation forwarded against the women involved in the proceedings. The affair thus was also triggered by parents' desire to find scapegoats for a profoundly distressing experience.

proverbs or help out as babysitters. On the contrary, grandmothers sowed, planted and gathered, they bred, pastured and slaughtered, they cooked, washed and cleaned; they often worked hard and helped provide food for the family to a degree and in ways that have not been fully appreciated by mainstream historiography¹¹.



Image 3: Grandmother cleaning green beans next to her granddaughter (around 1960)

Anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy gives a reason for this lack of scholarly understanding. Researchers' views of families were biased by their own belonging to modern societies, where infant mortality is low and children's welfare is usually granted by the state.

¹¹ For hunting-gathering societies see the pioneering study by Hawkes/ O'Connell/ Blurton Jones, 1989.

For Spain see Rodríguez Vázquez, 2016; for images from a 20th century Spanish village see Bardera Jiménez, 2008, pp. 12 (showing a midwife at a baptism), 14, 23, 26. Spanish proverbs frequently stage elderly women as very active parts of their communities. Here are some examples from the 17th century compilation by Gonzalo Correas: "Do no alcanza la vieja, alcanza la piedra". "Si no miran a la vieja, miran a lo que lleva." "La necesidad hace a la vieja trotar." "La mujer vieja, si no sirve de olla, sirve de cobertura." The old procuress Celestina from Fernando de Rojas' tragicomedy (1500/1501) sums up the expectations that weigh on her in a strong image: "¿A dónde irá el buey que no are? [sino a la carnicería]".

“We failed”, Hrdy states “to consider the profound impact of older siblings, grandmothers, uncles, or the mother’s lovers in worlds where more than half of all infants born would starve, be murdered or eaten, or succumb to accident or disease before they matured. Only at the end of the twentieth century, as findings by human behavioral ecologists and sociobiologists started to come in, did it become clear that in [...] societies with high rates of infant and child mortality – societies like those our ancestors were involved in – support from alloparents not only improved health, social maturation, and mental development, it was essential for child survival”¹².



Image 4: Grandmother Ana María and other relatives
(around 1960)

GRANDMOTHERS AND BABIES IN SPAIN

How about grandmothers in Early Modern Spain? Historians of course have been aware of the presence and importance of the older generations. Nevertheless, as for their roles in household economies and in the breeding of offspring, grandmotherhood seems to be widely uncharted territory; especially when it comes to their close association with pregnancy, birth and the first months and years of life. A period in which mothers and babies most depend on the support of others.

A first survey of the issue has brought to light a surprising number of references. These references might include important messages about the workings of Spanish communities in the past, about the creation of psychological bonds and social networks, and the interdependence of generations. Let us look at some of them:

¹² Hrdy, 2009, p. 105.

Grandmothers are often reported as providing house and chamber for birth¹³, together with a warming fire, clean water, sheets, cloths and bed linen, plus chicken broth and, according to a contemporary writer, the smell of fresh bread and bacon, and the taste of very good warm wine (“torrezno de buen tocino magro”, “pan reciente y torrezno de buen tocino magro”, “muy buen vino tibio”¹⁴); these aliments and odours were said to help during labour and to encourage parturition¹⁵.

Maternal forebears also used to stage the scene for unmarried daughters who bore children, be these mothers of commoners or the mistresses of a royal¹⁶. When mothers could not care for their babies, or did not survive birth and postpartum complications, grandmothers were liable to step in and act as foster-mothers, raising the child in their homes¹⁷.

Their intervention could even start before pregnancy concluded. We have got some telling reports of grandmothers interfering in the choice of birth assistants. They advised their daughters as to which midwife to choose, or even entered directly into negotiations about the working conditions and payment. This is what we unearthed when studying aristocratic female correspondence or diaries from Spanish social elites. In these sources, the recruitment of a midwife could become an important issue.

What is more, mothers of princesses and queens partook in obstetrical issues even when their daughters had been married to a foreign court, and interfered in the selection of an appropriate birth assistant¹⁸. Midwifery thus established a kind of umbilical cord through which daughters who married abroad remained attached to

¹³ Domínguez Moreno, José María, “El ciclo vital en la provincia de Cáceres: Del parto al primer vagido”, en *Revista de Folklore*, vol. 6a, 61 (1986), pp. 1–21, p.8 [paging of the digital version]. «<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/nd/ark:/59851/bmcc26q1>» [consulted 15 June 2019]; Aichinger/ Dulmovits, 2020, pp. 24–29.

¹⁴ Ruices de Fontecha, fol. 126. Many thanks to Nina Kremmel for providing a transcription of Fontecha’s text.

¹⁵ For the importance of the birth place, also in case of a mother’s death, see Hrdy, 2009, pp. 163, 258.

¹⁶ Ecclesiastical reports give us some insight into this aspect. Thus, in *Cumbres Mayores*, Seville, one “Luisa Jiménez, soltera, parió en 20 de septiembre de 1698 viviendo con sus padres Bernardo Jiménez y Isabel Rodríguez, y está criando el parto; no se ha podido sacar por sus padres, ni otra persona, el cómplice [...]”. García Martínez (1994, p. 16). As for the illegitimate sons of kings, there’s the example of Francisco Fernando, sired by king Philipp IV of Spain and born in the house of his maternal grandparents in 1626 (Carlos Varona, 2018, p. 150).

¹⁷ Biographical notes time and again testify to this fact which in Spanish historiography does not seem to have been fully appreciated and assessed in a comprehensive book. Let me give just one example, copied from an encyclopedic study by Manuel Gracia Rivas (2005, p. 299): “Cebrián y Agustín, Miguel (1691–1752), nacido en Zaragoza, el 29 de septiembre de 1691, era el menor de los hijos del IV conde de Fuenclara, D. José Cebrián y Alagón, y de D^a Lorenza Agustín y Martínez de Marcilla. Su madre falleció el día 5 de octubre, como consecuencia de las complicaciones del parto, dejando al conde con nueve hijos, uno de ellos recién nacido, por lo que la abuela materna tuvo que hacerse cargo de la familia y, tras su fallecimiento, los niños fueron atendidos por la criada María del Mas.” For the Eastern Alpine region see Mitterauer, 2013, p. 137–138; for breastfeeding grandmothers see Morel, 2002.

¹⁸ Aichinger/ Standhartinger, 2020.

their homeland and mothers, who were going to be the grandmothers of their offspring. At the same time, dowager queens imposed, or at least tried to impose, their symbolic presence at the court of foreign kings and princes¹⁹.

However, we are studying an age in which birth without a full-time midwife was quite a regular event among commoners. “Matrona no la ay; válese las mugeres unas de otras”, reports a clergyman after inspecting Castillo de las Guardas in South-Western Spain, thereby noting the absence of a professional obstetrician in the town in 1698²⁰. Where female neighbours and female kin of different ages gathered to deliver a mother from her pains and a baby, grandmothers most likely called the shots and had the final say.

Mothers were expected to look after their childbearing daughters. We can also observe this strong connection between mothers and daughters in professional midwifery. The craft was not taught in schools, rather it was handed down from mothers to daughters, and in some cases even from grandmothers to granddaughters²¹.



Image 5: The grandmother in the black mantilla
(1910-1912/ Francisco González Sola)

¹⁹ Aichinger/ Standhartinger, 2020, p. 599. For the telling case of Catalina de Médicis and her daughter Isabel de Valois, third wife of king Philipp II of Spain from 1560 to 1568, see also Junceda Avello, 1991, pp. 135-136.

²⁰ García Martínez, 1994, pp. 19-20.

²¹ See for example García Martínez, 1994, p. 26.

Midwives and grandmothers could turn from allies to fierce adversaries: In 1566, in La Vellés (Salamanca), one María Gavilana sued the midwife Inés Martín for causing the death of her daughter and her daughter's baby through negligent attendance. Inés Martín was a midwife who resided in the same town and who had assisted during childbirth²².

In Early Modern Spain, to be sure, many a baby was born in a state that called for urgent sacramental action. We have found a surprising number of reports of grandmothers supervising this hasty ritual of domestic christening²³. When baptism was performed in a regular way at a baptismal font, it used to be the grandmother who, together with the midwife, accompanied the baby's father and carried the infant in her arms during its first short exploration of the big, wide world²⁴. Grandmothers very often became their grandchildren's godmothers²⁵.

A woman who had fought her way through life and reached the realms of old age, was by that very achievement endowed with authority. The acts and symbolic practices discussed so far all added to her supremacy in a family network. A grandmother who did not live long enough to see her grandchild being born could of course not perform them. Nevertheless, in many a case her memory was evoked and honoured around the time of birth, most visibly through the act of christening: a grandmother's first name ranked very highly on the list of names to be chosen for a baby²⁶. Again, this seems to be true for both the daughters of queens and duchesses, and the offspring of peasants and artisans.

(Let us not leave unmentioned: some sources also indicate the hustle and bustle of "grandmothers from hell"²⁷, as Sarah Blaffer Hrdy calls them, in Spanish and Latin American communities. That is, grandmothers who were more concerned with the family honour than with an infant's welfare, thus killing new-borns or leaving them at the mercy of strangers or foundling homes²⁸. We will not unfold this complicated and complex aspect here, suffice this brief reference together with the

²² See e.g. *Ejecutoria del pleito litigado por María Gavilana y Pedro González, por si y en nombre de María González, su hija, madre, marido e hija respectivamente de Francisca Gavilana, difunta, vecinos de La Vellés (Salamanca) y Castellanos de Moriscos (Salamanca), con Inés Martín, viuda de Pedro Acedo, vecina de La Vellés (Salamanca), sobre fallecimiento de dicha difunta y su criatura por negligencia de la partera*, Archivo de la Real Chancillería de Valladolid, 1566-01-25, ES.47186.ARCHV//Registro de ejecutorias, caja 1091, 7.

²³ See Aichinger/ Dulmovits, 2020, p. 24-29.

²⁴ As for the importance and symbolism of this first outdoor activity see Loux, 1978, pp. 142-147.

²⁵ For France see Morel, 2008, p. 144-145; for Italy De Marchi/ Alemani, 2015, pp. 124-125.

²⁶ See for example González López, 2019, pp. 411-412, Carretero Melo, 2002, p. 236. For a similar situation in France and Italy see Morel, 2004, p. 16.; De Marchi/ Alemani, 2015, pp. 124-125.

²⁷ Hrdy, 2009, 262.

²⁸ The question deserves a fuller examination. I have found scarce references to grandmothers involved in the exposure of new-borns so far. Clues to their role in infanticide can be found in Rodríguez González, 2018, p. 284. For possible "opposite effects of maternal and paternal grandmothers" see Voland/ Beise, 2002.

announcement of further research on this important point.)

CONCLUSION

Birth in the past was much more than a moment of transition from a mother's womb to the visible world, an action to get over with as fast as possible. It was the moment in which the foundations for a life to come were laid; where elementary social ties were created and symbolically expressed; where authority was exerted and confirmed. We can confidently state: a grandmother who took a baby to the baptismal font, who bequeathed an infant with her Christian name, and who sanctified her house through the birth of a grandchild was bound to provide further support, or at least to become a powerful image imprinted in a human's body and soul.

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IMAGES

- Image 1: Paz Gatell, “Grandmothers and granddaughters embroidering”, *Hagamos Memoria*, Cristina Bardera Jiménez (coord.), Almendral de la Cañada, Excmo. Ayuntamiento Almendral de la Cañada, 2008, p. 23.
- Image 2: “Velatorio de Blanquita la que murió de tifus / Marcel”, Ferrol, 1895, Archivo Dixital de Galicia, reference code ES.GA.15030.ARAG/2.10.1.8.1./FM.Caixa 13-59
Digitalized image: <http://arquivo.galiciana.gal/arpadweb/gl/consulta/registro.do?id=432830> (revised 6 May 2021).
- Image 3: “Abuela limpiando judías junto a su nieta”, around 1960, Programa “Los Legados de la Tierra” de la Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Albacete, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Cuenca, reference code ES.16078AHP
Digitalized image: http://bidicam.castillalamancha.es/bibdigital/archivo_de_la_imagen/es/consulta/registro.cmd?id=33558 (revised 6 May 2021).
- Image 4: “Abuela Ana María y otros familiares en el corral con una pequeña piara de cerdos”, around 1960, Programa “Los Legados de la Tierra” de la Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Albacete, reference code ES.2003AHP
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Image 5: “La abuela en la mantilla negra”, Francisco González Sola, Colección José A. Pérez Cruz, Biblioteca Virtual del Patrimonio Bibliográfico, 1910-1912. Digitalized image: <https://bvpb.mcu.es/es/consulta/registro.do?id=510723> (revised 6 May 2021).

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