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EUSEBIUS PRIZE ESSAY

The Womb of Flame: The Pre-Christian Origins of a Greco-Syrian Baptismal Metaphor

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Scholars of late antique liturgy usually find the origins of baptismal imagery in the Bible and the daily life of early Christians. This article reveals that some metaphors, such as the 'furnace' image, may also come from pre-Christian literature. In ancient Greek and Mesopotamian sources, the female uterus is compared to a furnace. This article argues that, based on its use in pre-Christian literature, the furnace image might also be considered feminine. This image describes a broader range of activities in baptism than that ascribed to female agency until now and seems more empowering for today's women.

In 1950s Jean Daniélou, in his work on the Bible and liturgy, demonstrated the scriptural origins of many baptismal images.[1] The scholarly tradition of viewing these images from the biblical perspective has been

CCSL = Corpus Christianorum Series Latina; CSCO = Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium; *PG* = *Patrologia Graeca*; *SC* = *Sources Chrétiennes*

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[1] Jean Daniélou, *Bible et liturgie: la théologie biblique des sacrements et des fêtes d'après les Pères de l'Église,* Paris 1951.

flourishing since then.[2] Additionally, scholars are well aware of how ancients employed comparisons with everyday life objects and phenomena in order to make clear spiritual realities of baptism that are hard to comprehend.[3] Yet, non-Christian origins of some baptismal metaphors await investigation. This article is a case study of the furnace imagery used in some baptismal sources and aims to reveal its pre-Christian roots and show its relevance for women's studies and catechesis addressed to women.

The furnace image is exemplary for research into pre-Christian origins of baptismal imagery due to its frequent attestations in medical, historical, comical and magical Greek literature and ancient Mesopotamian texts. This image is widely used in the baptismal sources in the late antique and medieval Near East, but especially in Syria and Antioch. Sebastian Brock, in his work on the Holy Spirit in Syrian baptismal tradition, has pointed out the images of the mother's womb and furnace used side-by-side in Syriac sources when those sources refer to the baptismal water and font.[4] For example, the Syrian Orthodox service mentions this imagery in the opening prayer: 'Mix, O Lord, into this water … the power and working of the Holy Spirit so that it may become a spiritual womb and a furnace that pours out incorruptibility.'[5] Brock indicates that the baptismal metaphor 'the womb of flame' is found as early as in the hymns on the Epiphany attributed to the fourth-century poet Ephrem the Syrian. These hymns compared the fiery furnace from Daniel iii.19–22 to the baptismal pool.[6]

Brock does not explore the pre-Christian usage of the baptismal furnace image, yet he suggests its purely Christian origin, namely that the classic Syrian metaphor of the Holy Spirit as the fire, also biblical, may lie at its roots. I agree that the furnace image can also be treated as scriptural (the fiery furnace from Dan iii.19–22, baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire in Matthew iii.11 and the fiery tongues of the Spirit in Acts ii.3). Additionally, the image is clearly based on analogy to objects of daily

[2] For the most recent studies that address scriptural origins of baptismal metaphors see Robin M. Jensen, *Baptismal imagery in early Christianity: ritual, visual and theological dimensions*, Grand Rapids, MI 2012, and Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: history, theology, and liturgy in the first five centuries*, Grand Rapids, MI–Cambridge 2009.

[3] Hugh M. Riley, *Christian initiation: a comparative study of the interpretation of the baptismal liturgy in the mystagogical writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Ambrose of Milan*, Washington, DC 1974.

[4] Sebastian Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian baptismal tradition*, Pestcataway, NJ 1979, 85–6.

[5] *The Sacrament of baptism according to the ancient rite of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch*, ed. Mar Athanasius Yeshue Samuel, Damascus 1974, 47; trans. at Brock, *The Holy Spirit*, 86.

[6] *De Epiphania* 8.5–6, in *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)*, ed. E. Beck, CSCO clxxxvi, Syr. 82, Louvain 1959, 169–70; cf. *Breviarium iuxta Ritum Ecclesiae Antiochenae Syrorum*, iii, Mosul 1889, 256b, 281b.

life – ovens, kilns, crucibles.[7] The transformation of soft clay into terracotta pots and metal mixtures into pure gold and silver was useful if one wanted to describe the spiritual and invisible change that the baptised undergo in the baptismal pool. While not denying the impact of the Bible and ordinary life on the invention of the furnace image, this paper will show that this image is used in pre-Christian literature, in which the furnace is, in fact, the image that depicts the female womb. It will argue that apart from Scripture and daily life, the baptismal furnace image also has pre-Christian origins and, as a depiction of the womb, may also be considered feminine and thus may shed new light on female agency in baptism.

Firstly, to show how the furnace imagery is used in baptismal sources, this article will analyse the first instances of this metaphor in the second- to early fourth-century *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and in Cyril of Jerusalem's fourth-century *Protocatechesis*, in which this image is indirectly applied to baptism. Next, this paper will study the fourth-century Ps-Ephremian hymns on the Epiphany and the late fourth/early fifth-century Greek authors John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Connecting the furnace and womb baptismal metaphors, Ps-Ephrem, Chrysostom and Theodore provide insight into the pre-Christian history of the furnace image, in which the furnace/oven imagery was applied to the woman's uterus. Additionally, this study will highlight some significant examples of the furnace image in later Syriac sources.

Secondly, in order to reveal the pre-Christian origins of the furnace image, this paper will investigate how pre-Christian medical, historical, comic and magical sources used the furnace and related imagery to describe and depict the female reproductive organs and body as a whole. And, finally, conclusions for women's studies will be drawn.

Christian Greek and Syriac sources

The first attestations of the furnace image regarding baptism

It seems that from the early centuries, the furnace/oven image already featured in Christian sources with a somewhat indirect relation to baptism. The intriguing metaphor used in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 15.2 compares the martyr being burned in the fire to bread being baked in the oven and gold and silver metals melting in the furnace. The text goes on: 'The fire made the form of a vault, as a ship's sail filled by the wind, walling around the body of the martyr. And it was in the middle not as flesh burning, but as bread baking, or as gold and silver refined in a furnace

[7] For ovens and kilns of the era see Jennifer A. Bairn, *The inner life of ancient houses: an archaeology of Dura-Europos*, Oxford 2014, 164–5, 184, and Anny Allara, 'L'Îlot des potiers et les fours à Doura-Europos: étude préliminaire', *Syria* lxix, fasc. 1/2 (1992), 101–20.

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(ἐν καμίνῳ).'[8] Although it is not mentioned explicitly in this source, martyrdom was widely associated with baptism from the third century onwards and was referred to as 'baptism of blood'.[9] Since the furnace/crucible image is attested in relation to baptism in later sources, this paper assumes that in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, we also most likely see baptismal 'furnace' and not eucharistic imagery as was previously claimed.[10]

In the mid-fourth century *Baptismal catechesis* of Cyril of Jerusalem, the furnace imagery is attested regarding the exorcism rites performed before baptism. Cleansing the gold from the mixture of metals in the crucible is similar to exorcism since they clean the devil from the soul. According to Cyril:

> Imagine virgin gold alloyed with various foreign substances: copper, tin, iron, lead. What we are after is gold alone, and gold cannot be purified of its dross without fire. Similarly, the soul cannot be purified without exorcisms, exorcisms which, since they are culled from the divine Scriptures, possess divine power … Just as goldsmiths with their delicate instruments direct a blast upon the fire and, by agitating the surrounding flame, cause the gold hidden in the crucible (ἐν τῇ χώνῃ) to bubble up and so gain their object, in the same way when the exorcists inspire fear by means of the divine Spirit and regenerate the soul through the body as in the crucible (ἐν χώνῃ), our enemy the devil flees and we left with salvation and the sure prospect of eternal life.[11]

These two examples show that the furnace imagery must have been used regarding various baptismal themes before it began to designate the baptismal font. The first attestation of such use seems to be Ps-Ephrem's hymns on Epiphany.

[8] 'τὸ γὰρ πῦρ καμάρας εἶδος ποιῆσαν ὥσπερ ὀθόνη πλοίου ὑπὸ πνεύματος πληρουμένη, κύκλῳ περιετείχισεν τὸ σῶμα τοῦ μάρτυρος. καὶ ἦν μέσον οὐχ ὡς σὰρξ καιομένη ἀλλ' ὡς ἄρτος ὀπτώμενος ἢ ὡς χρυσὸς καὶ ἄργυρος ἐν καμίνῳ πυρούμενος': *Polycarp's epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp*, ed. and trans. P. Hartog, Oxford 2013, 260; trans. at p. 261.

[9] Mary H. Griffin, 'Martyrdom as a second baptism: issues and expectations for the early Christian martyrs', unpubl. PhD diss. Los Angeles, CA 2002.

[10] Ibid. 3. J. A. Kleist, 'An early Christian prayer', *Orate Fratres* xxii (1948), 201–6. Hartog is doubtful about it: *Polycarp's epistle*, 312.

[11] 'Νόμισον εἶναι ἀργὸν χρυσὸν, καὶ δεδολωμένον, ποικίλαις ὕλαις ἀναμεμιγμένον, χαλκῷ, καὶ κασσιτέρῳ, καὶ σιδήρῳ, καὶ μολύβδῳ· ζητοῦμεν τὸν χρυσὸν μόνον ἔχειν· χρυσὸς μὴ δύναται ἄνευ πυρὸς καθαρθῆναι τὰ ἀνοίκεια·οὕτως ἄνευ ἐπορκισμῶν οὐ δύναται καθαρθῆναι ψυχή· εἰσὶ δὲ θεῖοι, ἐκ θείων γραφῶν συνειλεγμένοι· … Ὃν γὰρ τρόπον οἱ τῆς χρυσοχοϊκῆς ἐργασίας ἔμπειροι, διὰ τινῶν λεπτῶν ὀργάνων τὸ πνεῦμα τῷ πυρὶ παρεμβάλλοντες, καὶ τὸ ἐν τῇ χώνῃ κεκρυμμένον χρυσίον ἀναφυσῶντες, τὴν παρακειμένην ἐρεθίζοντες φλόγα εὑρίσκουσι τὸ ζητούμενον· οὕτω τῶν ἐπορκιζόντων, διὰ Πνεύματος θείου ἐμβαλλόντων τὸν φόβον, καὶ ὥσπερ ἐν χώνῃ, τῷ σώματι, τὴν ψυχὴν ἀναζωπυρούντων· φεύγει μὲν ὁ ἐχθρὸς δαίμων, παραμένει δὲ ἡ σωτηρία, καὶ παραμένει ἡ ἐλπὶς τῆς αἰωνίου ζωῆς': *Protocatech 9, in Cyrilli Hierosolymorum archiepiscopi opera quae supersunt omnia*, i, ed. W. C. Reischl and J. Rupp, Munich 1848; repr. Hildesheim 1967, 12; trans. by Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson (with my minor corrections) in *The works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, i, Washington, DC 2005, 77.

Ps-Ephrem

In the Syriac hymns on the Epiphany, attributed to Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373 CE), the furnace image is merged with the womb metaphor, which was widely used in the late antique East and West. The hymns on Epiphany draw on the narrative of the three young men in the fiery furnace (from Dan. iii.19–30). He compares the young men's entrance into the fire of the furnace to descending into the baptismal pool. The three men plunged (ܥܡܕ) into the furnace but ܥܡܕ also means 'were baptised'. They were cleansed in the womb of flame (ܪܚܡܐ ܕܢܘܪܐ) – an expression similar to ܪܚܡ ܕܡܝ ('the womb of water') used in Ephrem in referring to the water in the baptismal pool or to the pool itself.[12] The imagery of fire and water is merged: the young men feasted in 'the blazing floods' (ܪܗܛܬܐ ܕܥܩܬ). At a certain point, Christ entered the scene. He sprinkled heavenly dew on them but also dissolved the ropes with which the earthly one (i.e. King Nebuchadnezzar) had bound them. The Son of God also seemed to be a fourth in the furnace with the three young men. The stanza reads:

> *The three illustrious in Babylon*
> *Plunged/were baptized (ܥܡܕ) in the furnace of fire (ܟܝܢܐ ܕܢܘܪܐ)* [*cf.* Dan. iii.23] *and went out.*
> *They went in and were purified in the midst/bosom/womb of flame (ܪܚܡܐ ܕܢܘܪܐ)*
> *They jubilated in the blazing floods.*
> *There You sprinkled the heavenly dew on them.*
> *There You dissolved the bonds of the earthly one from them* [cf. Dan. iii.25].
> *Behold, the three illustrious entered and found the fourth one in the furnace (ܟܘܪܣܐ).*[13]

In the next stanza, the author is even more explicit on the connection between the furnace image and baptism. The open fire means not only the fire but also the Holy Spirit; the Spirit, hidden and mixed in baptismal water, depicts baptism in the flame (ܪܚܡܐ). This is the major difference between a furnace as an object of daily life and the baptismal 'furnace' imagery: the baptismal 'furnace' is filled not only with fire but also with the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the three young men is the same baptism in which Christians are called to be baptised and this baptism releases the earthly bonds. The Spirit, who was also the fourth in the furnace with the three young men, is hidden in it:

[12] *De ecclesia* 36.3, in *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de ecclesia*, ed. E. Beck, CSCO cxcviii, Syr. 84, Louvain 1960, 91.

[13] *De Epiphania* 8.5, p. 169.

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That open fire that shines there
Disclosed the fire and the Holy Spirit.
So, behold, mixed and hidden in the water,
In the flame, He[14] *depicts baptism.*
In this baptism (or var. "flame" ܒܠܗܒܐ), go, enter, and plunge (ܥܘܠ), my brothers.
Behold, it releases the bonds; in [this baptism] is
The divine third hidden and dissolved
That became fourth in the furnace (ܒܐܬܘܢܐ).[15]

The question remains: although the context in which the furnace imagery appears is baptismal, is it correct to translate ܟܪܣ ܕܢܘܪܐ as 'the womb of flame' and not 'the bosom of flame' or 'in the midst of flame'? Although the word ܟܪܣ has a wide spectrum of meanings, such as 'bosom, lap, womb, cavity, recess, inner part',[16] Sebastian Brock translated ܟܪܣ ܕܢܘܪܐ as a 'womb of flame'[17] in accordance with the Ephremian use of this word in baptismal contexts. In Ephrem one finds the expression ܟܪܣ ܕܡܝ 'the womb of water'[18] and similar ܟܪܣ ܕܝܠܕܐ 'the womb of birth'[19] with reference to baptismal water and the baptismal pool. In the hymns on the Church, the image of the womb of the river (Jordan) ܟܪܣ ܕܢܗܪܐ in which Christ plunged in order to be baptised is compared to Mary's womb: Christ shone at his baptism in the womb of the river and at his birth from Mary's womb (ܒܟܪܣ ܕܝܠܕܬܗ ܕܡܪܝܡ).[20] The word ܟܪܣ parallels ܟܪܣ – the latter clearly means 'woman's womb' in this context. Hence, ܟܪܣ ܕܢܗܪܐ can be translated as 'the womb of the river', even though one says it metaphorically. Interestingly, since in Ephrem, the divinity is frequently associated with fire,[21] the image of Christ shining light forth in the womb of the river creates another connection between 'the womb of the river' (ܟܪܣ ܕܢܗܪܐ) and the fiery furnace called by Ps-Ephrem 'the womb of flame' (ܟܪܣ ܕܢܘܪܐ). In the furnace and in the river, the divine light and fire were manifested.

[14] However, there is no third person masculine pronoun *hu* in another manuscript in which these hymns survive, but the verb 'depict' has the third person feminine form ܡܚܝܛ, which is also the same form as the second singular. This can be as well translated as 'she depicts' or 'you depict'. The former may point out the traditional feminine pronoun applied to the Holy Spirit until the end of the fourth century: Sebastian Brock, '"Come, companionate mother, come, Holy Spirit": a forgotten aspect of early Eastern Christian imagery', in *Fire from heaven: studies in Syriac theology and liturgy*, Aldershot 2006, 249–57.

[15] *De Epiphania* 8.6.

[16] J. Payne Smith, *A compendious Syriac dictionary*, Oxford 1903, 403.

[17] Brock, *The Holy Spirit*, 86.

[18] *De ecclesia* 36.3.

[19] *De virginitate* 7.7, in *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de virginitate*, ed. E. Beck, CSCO ccxxiii, Syr. 94, Louvain 1962, 26.

[20] *De ecclesia* 36.3–6. See also Sebastian Brock, *The luminous eye: the spiritual world vision of St Ephrem*, Rome 1985, 71.

[21] Brock, *The luminous eye*, 24–5.

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Moreover, there is further evidence in favour of the translation of ܟܒܠܐ ܪܚܡ as 'in the womb of flame' and not just 'in the midst of flame'. In the hymns *On Epiphany*, where the expression ܟܒܠܐ ܪܚܡ is found, there are also several places in which the phrase ܟܢܝܢܬܐ ܪܚܡ is used with reference to the baptismal pool.[22] In two of them, the author employs ܟܢܝܢܬܐ ܪܚܡ in the context of baptismal rebirth, which is an indication that this expression can be translated as 'the womb of baptism' and not 'the bosom of baptism'. For example, 'how much the womb of baptism (ܟܢܝܢܬܐ ܪܚܡ) sanctifies; its conception and birth [are] pure and spiritual';[23] 'baptism became the mother that gives birth to the spiritual ones every day … In the womb of baptism (ܟܢܝܢܬܐ ܪܚܡ) the debt of the belly (ܟܪܣ) was repaid'.[24] The expression 'womb of baptism' seems to be a fixed metaphor in *On Epiphany*, which refers to the baptismal pool. The metaphor ܟܒܠܐ ܪܚܡ, which refers to the furnace, also has some links with the pool: since the author of the hymns compared the experience of the three men in the furnace to baptism, and fire in the furnace with water in the baptismal pool, the furnace itself became the place where they were purified; hence, it became the baptismal font. Clearly, in *On Epiphany,* 'the womb of flame' (ܟܒܠܐ ܪܚܡ) and 'womb of baptism' (ܟܢܝܢܬܐ ܪܚܡ) mean the same thing, namely, the baptismal pool.

To sum up, the furnace metaphor and womb image in Ps-Ephrem are interrelated to the point that the word that usually is translated as 'womb' in baptismal contexts is used in the expression that alludes to the furnace. Another image that connects the two metaphors is the fire/light that designates divinity in the Ephremian tradition. The Holy Spirit is mixed with the fire in the furnace and the Son of God shines the light in Mary's womb. This connection between the womb and furnace metaphors may be the impact of how the furnace image is used in the pre-Christian sources in the Near East.

The Antiochene authors

In Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia, the image of baptism as renewal in the furnace follows the baptismal metaphor of regeneration and is also linked to womb imagery.

In his *Baptismal instructions*, delivered in 388 CE, Chrysostom compares baptismal renewal to the remaking of a metal vessel in the furnace. First, he asks why the baptistery is called 'the bath of regeneration' and not 'the bath of the remission of sins' or 'of cleansing'. He answers that this is so because, in this bath, we were born anew and refashioned from the nature of water. He gradually passes from water to the furnace imagery.

[22] *De Epiphania* 7.25; 8.9; 9.2; 13.2; 13.14. [23] Ibid. 8.9. [24] Ibid. 13.1–2.

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This bath 'melts' you entirely. When cleaned, even carefully, a vessel still can have some stains of grease. However, when melted in the furnace and renewed, it shines again as new. Chrysostom's comparison goes as follows:

> And why, someone will say, if the bath takes away all our sins, is it not called the bath of the remission of sins, or the bath of cleansing, rather than the bath of regeneration? The reason is that it does not simply remit our sins, nor does it simply cleanse us of our faults, but *it does this just as if we were born anew*. For *it does create us anew* and it fashions us again, not moulding us from earth but creating us from a different element, the nature of water.
>
> *This bath does not merely cleanse the vessel but melts the whole thing down again*. Even if a vessel has been wiped off and carefully cleaned, it still has the marks of grease and still bears the traces of the stain. But when it is thrown into *the smelting furnace* (εἰς χωνευτήριον) and renewed by the flame, it puts aside all dirt and when it comes from *the furnace* (ἀπὸ τῆς καμίνου), it gives forth the same shine as newly moulded vessels.[25]

Baptismal cleansing is not just cleansing with water, but it is a thorough renewal. Chrysostom uses the scriptural image of 'the bath of regeneration' (λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας [Titus iii.5]); yet, he is not satisfied with just saying that the baptised are born anew in the pool. He proceeds to explain how this renewal happens and introduces the metaphor of the furnace. The melting and recreating of a vessel seem to him the best images that illustrate baptismal change and not surprisingly so because, first, they depict complete transformation and, second, the image of the furnace is related to the domain of birth on a cultural level.

Then, Chrysostom proceeds to another similar image, namely the melting and recasting of a golden statue. This metaphor closely resembles Cyril of Jerusalem's imagery. As in Cyril's 'crucible' of exorcisms, the soul is, like gold, cleaned from other mixed substances; in Chrysostom's

[25] 'Καὶ τίνος ἕνεκεν, φησίν, εἰ τὰ ἁμαρτήματα ἡμῖν ἅπαντα ἀφίησι τὸ λουτρὸν, οὐχὶ λουτρὸν ἀφέσεως ἁμαρτημάτων καλεῖται, οὔτε λουτρὸν καθάρσεως, ἀλλὰ λουτρὸν παλιγγενεσίας. Ὅτι οὐχ ἁπλῶς ἡμῖν ἀφίησι τὰ ἁμαρτήματα, οὐδὲ ἁπλῶς ἡμᾶς καθαίρει τῶν πλημμελημάτων, ἀλλ' οὕτως ὡς ἂν εἰ ἄνωθεν ἐγεννήθημεν. Καὶ γὰρ ἄνωθεν ἡμᾶς δημιουργεῖ καὶ κατασκευάζει, οὐκ ἀπὸ γῆς διαπλάττον πάλιν, ἀλλ' ἐξ ἑτέρου στοιχείου τῆς τῶν ὑδάτων φύσεως δημιουργοῦν. Οὐ γὰρ ἁπλῶς ἀποσμήχει τὸ σκεῦος, ἀλλ' ὁλόκληρον αὐτὸ ἀναχωνεύει πάλιν. Τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἀποσμηχόμενα, κἂν μετὰ ἀκριβείας ἐκκαθαίρηται, ἔχει τῆς ποιότητος ἴχνη καὶ τῆς κηλῖδος φέρει τὰ λείψανα· τὰ δὲ εἰς χωνευτήριον ἐμπεσόντα καὶ διὰ τῆς φλογὸς ἀνανεωθέντα, πᾶσαν ἀποθέμενα ῥυπαρίαν, τὴν αὐτὴν τοῖς νεοπαγέσιν ἀπὸ τῆς καμίνου προελθόντα τὴν λαμπηδόνα ἀφίησιν': Jean Chrysostome, *Trois Catéchèses baptismales*, ed. A. Piédanel and L. Doutreleau, *SC* ccclxvi, Lyon 1990, 136, 138; trans. (with my corrections) in John Chrysostom, *Baptismal instructions*, ed. and trans. P. W. Harkins, Westminster 1963, 138 (italics mine).

'crucible' of baptismal water, God cleanses fallen human nature from sin as a golden statue is cleansed from rust:

> When a man takes and melts down a golden statue which became filthy because of time, smoke, dust, and rust, he returns it to us clean and shining. So, too, God takes this nature of ours that is rusted with the rust of sin, covered with abundant soot of our faults, and that has destroyed the beauty he put into it in the beginning, and He smelts it anew. He plunges it into the waters as *into the smelting furnace* (εἰς χωνευτήριον) and *lets the grace of the Spirit fall on it instead of the flames*. Then he brings us from there refashioned, renewed, and capable of rivalling the rays of the sun with our brightness.[26]

John most likely knew the furnace image from earlier catechetical tradition, which Cyril also knew well but of which we know little. In Chrysostom, the furnace image explains the baptismal rebirth, making it more tangible, given that human conception and gestation remained quite mysterious for late antiquity and needed more explanation based on imagery taken from everyday life. Chrysostom's use of the furnace image in connection to womb imagery may also reflect the influence of non-Christian furnace imagery in describing the female womb and its functions.

In Theodore of Mopsuestia's third homily on baptism (*Catechetical homily* 14), delivered during his episcopal career (392–428 CE) and now surviving in the Syriac translation, the sequence of the images is similar to that in Chrysostom: the furnace image follows the birth metaphor. First, Theodore compares baptismal rebirth with the conception and gestation of a human being, incorporating a Christianised version of the widespread one-seed theory of conception into his catechesis. According to its vulgarised form, the one-seed theory argues that there is no female agency in conception; the woman's womb is a passive receiver of the male semen. Instead of the semen growing on its own, Theodore introduces the grace of the Spirit as an active agent that forms a human being from this semen. The same divine power changes the baptised into a new, virtuous being.[27]

[26] 'Ὥσπερ οὖν ἀνδριάντα χρυσοῦν πολλῷ τῷ χρόνῳ καὶ τῷ καπνῷ καὶ τῇ κόνει καὶ ἰῷ ῥυπωθέντα λαβών τις καὶ χωνεύσας, καθαρώτατον ἡμῖν καὶ ἀστράπτοντα ἀποδίδωσιν, οὕτω καὶ τὴν φύσιν τὴν ἡμετέραν ὁ Θεὸς ἰωθεῖσαν τῷ τῆς ἁμαρτίας ἰῷ, καὶ πολὺν δεξαμένην τὸν καπνὸν τὸν ἀπὸ τῶν πλημμελημάτων, καὶ τὸ κάλλος ἀπολέσασαν, ὅπερ παρ' αὐτῇ παρὰ τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐγκατέθηκε, λαβὼν ἄνωθεν ἐχώνευσε, καὶ καθάπερ εἰς χωνευτήριον ἐμβαλὼν εἰς τὰ ὕδατα, καὶ τὴν τοῦ Πνεύματος ἐπαφεὶς χάριν ἀντὶ φλογός, εἶτα νεοπαγεῖς ἐκεῖθεν καὶ καινοὺς γενομένους καὶ αὐταῖς δυναμένους λοιπὸν ἀντιλάμψαι ταῖς ἡλιακαῖς ἀκτῖσι μετὰ πολλῆς ἀνάγει τῆς λαμπρότητος': ibid, trans. Harkins (with my corrections) at John Chrysostom, *Baptismal instructions*, 138–9 (italics mine).

[27] For Theodore's use of the one-seed theory of human conception see Sofia Puchkova, 'Baptismal water as the mother's womb: the reception of a liturgical

He shows in this that as in carnal birth (ܝܠܕܘܬܐ ܒܣܪܢܝܬܐ) *the womb of the mother* (ܟܪܣܐ ܕܐܡܐ) receives the human seed (ܙܪܥܐ), and *the divine hand fashions it* according to a law (of nature established) from the beginning, so also in baptism, *the water of which becomes a womb to the one who is being born* (ܡܝܐ ܕܥܡܗ ܟܪܣܐ ܗܘ ܠܡܢ ܕܡܬܝܠܕ ܒܗ ܗܘ). The grace of the Spirit in it fashions (ܡܨܝܪ) the one who is being baptized for the second birth (ܠܝܠܕܘܬܐ ܬܪܝܬܝܬܐ) and changes him completely into a new being.[28]

Here, most importantly, the image of the fashioning of a human being in the mother's womb strikingly resembles the image of making vessels from clay. This is the first step to pass to the furnace metaphor since Theodore's 'furnace' is a kiln for baking clay vessels.

Some lines further, explaining the consecration of water in the baptistery, Theodore again uses the womb image. He states that the transforming power comes to the water from the Holy Spirit through the bishop's benedictions 'so it [water] may become *an awe-inspiring womb for the second birth* (ܟܪܣܐ ܕܕܚܠܬܐ ܠܝܠܕܘܬܐ ܬܪܝܬܝܬܐ) and so that those who descend into it may be fashioned afresh by the grace of the Holy Spirit and born again as a different and virtuous human nature'.[29] He describes the consecrated water as a furnace where the baptised is refashioned into an immortal being:

When the water has been prepared by these (benedictions) and has received such a power by the coming of the Holy Spirit, you descend into it hoping, by the appropriate conduct, to receive from it an awe-inspiring salvation. Therefore, you should think that *you are going into the water as into a furnace* (ܟܝܢܬܐ), where you will be renewed and refashioned in order that you may move to a virtuous nature after having cast away your old mortality and assuming a perfect nature, immortal and incorruptible.[30]

metaphor in Theodore of Mopsuestia's biblical exegesis', *Parole de l'Orient* xlix (2023), 169–90.

[28] ܗܕܐ ܒܗܢ ܡܕܝ ܕܐܝܟ ܕܒܣܪܢܝܬܐ ܝܠܕܘܬܐ ܐܝܟ ܟܕ ܡܢ ܙܪܥܐ ܐܢܫܝ ܟܪܣܐ ܕܐܡܐ ܩܒܠ ܐܢ ܐܝܕ ܕܐܠܗܐ ܡܨܝܪ ܠܗ ܠܐ ܒܡܢ ܕܡܬܝܠܕ ܒܗ ܗܘ ܐܦ ܡܝܐ ܕܥܡܗ ܟܪܣܐ ܗܘ ܠܡܢ ܕܡܬܝܠܕ ܒܗ ܗܘ ܒܪܝܬ ܡܢ ܪܘܚܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܘܒܝܠܕܘܬܐ ܬܪܝܬܝܬܐ ܝܠܕ ܐܢܫ ܐܚܪܢ ܕܫܦܝܪ ܘܡܫܬܢܐ ܠܟܝܢܐ ܕܚܕܬ ܒܪܝܬ ܐܢܫ ܚܕܬ ܘܡܫܚܪ ܠܗ ܡܢ ܟܠ ܡܕܝ ܕܒܠܝ ܘܠܒܫ ܠܗ ܟܝܢܐ ܕܚܕܬ ܕܠܐ ܡܝܬ ܘܠܐ ܦܓܝܪ ܘܠܐ ܡܬܚܠܫ.

: *Les Homelies catéchétiques de Théodore de Mopsueste: reproduction phototypique du Ms. Mingana Syr. 561, traduction, introduction, index*, ed. Raymond Tonneau and Robert Devreesse, Turnhout 1949, fo. 106r; trans. at *Commentary on the Lord's Prayer, on the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist*, ed. Alphonse Mingana, Piscataway, NJ 1933, 55 (with my corrections).

[29] ܗܘ ܡܝܐ ܕܒܗܕܐ ܩܕܫ ܒܗ ܒܪܟܬܐ ܐܠܝܢ ܘܩܒܠ ܟܝܢ ܡܢ ܪܘܚܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܐܬ ܐܦ ܐܢ ܒܟ ܠܡܢ ܕܡܬܝܠܕ ܒܗ ܗܘ ܒܪܝܬ ܡܢ ܪܘܚܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܘܒܝܠܕܘܬܐ ܬܪܝܬܝܬܐ ܝܠܕ ܐܢܫ ܐܚܪܢ ܕܫܦܝܪ ܘܡܫܬܢܐ ܠܟܝܢܐ ܕܚܕܬ ܒܪܝܬ ܐܢܫ ܚܕܬ ܘܡܫܚܪ ܠܗ ܡܢ ܟܠ ܡܕܝ ܕܒܠܝ ܘܠܒܫ ܠܗ ܟܝܢܐ ܕܚܕܬ ܕܠܐ ܡܝܬ ܘܠܐ ܦܓܝܪ ܘܠܐ ܡܬܚܠܫ.

: *Les Homélies catéchétiques de Théodore de Mopsueste,* fo. 107r; trans. at *Commentary on the Lord's Prayer,* 56–7.

[30] ܚܙܝ ܕܐܢ ܡܝܐ ܗܠܝܢ ܡܬܟܫܪ ܒܗ ܡܢ ܩܕܫ ܪܘܚܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܘܩܒܠ ܟܝܢ ܡܢ ܗܠܝܢ ܒܪܟܬܐ ܐܢ ܐܝܕ ܕܐܠܗܐ ܡܨܝܪ ܠܗ ܠܐ ܒܡܢ ܕܡܬܝܠܕ ܒܗ ܗܘ ܐܦ ܡܝܐ ܕܥܡܗ ܟܪܣܐ ܗܘ ܠܡܢ ܕܡܬܝܠܕ ܒܗ ܗܘ ܒܪܝܬ ܡܢ ܪܘܚܐ ܩܕܝܫܐ ܘܒܝܠܕܘܬܐ ܬܪܝܬܝܬܐ ܝܠܕ ܐܢܫ ܐܚܪܢ ܕܫܦܝܪ ܘܡܫܬܢܐ ܠܟܝܢܐ ܕܚܕܬ ܒܪܝܬ ܐܢܫ ܚܕܬ ܘܡܫܚܪ ܠܗ ܡܢ ܟܠ ܡܕܝ ܕܒܠܝ ܘܠܒܫ ܠܗ ܟܝܢܐ ܕܚܕܬ ܕܠܐ ܡܝܬ ܘܠܐ ܦܓܝܪ ܘܠܐ ܡܬܚܠܫ.

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Here the transition to the furnace image may seem abrupt. Yet, in the following lines, it becomes clear that both images, on the one hand are connected through the imagery of 'fashioning' and, on the other, illustrate different sides of the Spirit's activity in baptism. Theodore refers to the habit that all potters have, namely, to refashion a clay vessel immersing it again in water if it were damaged before firing. He mentions Jeremiah, who was ordered to go to a potter's house to see how he worked on damaged vessels (Jeremiah xviii.1–6) and, after this, received God's promise of forgiveness and renewal. In baptism, Theodore maintains, one is also renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit, who accomplishes it in water and then 'hardens' or 'bakes' the mutable nature of the baptised in the baptismal 'furnace' as a clay vessel by fire so that this nature receives the first fruits of immutability.[31] After baptism, according to Theodore, no renewal in further baptism should be expected because clay vessels/the baptised have already been fired:

> [We resemble] a vessel that has been made by a potter and [then] has been refashioned in water, as long as it remains in its soft clay nature (cf. Jer. xviii.4) and *has not yet participated in the nature of fire* (ܟܝܢܐ ܕܢܘܪܐ). However, *when* it has been brought and *baked in the fire* (ܐܫܬܠܩ ܒܢܘܪܐ), it will no longer[32] be remade and refashioned. Similarly, now, because of our mortal nature, we rightly receive our renewal through baptism. But when we are refashioned through it and receive the grace of the Holy Spirit, which strengthens us more than any fire can do, we thus do not receive a second renewal; neither do we expect a second baptism.[33]

To sum up, in Theodore, the womb and furnace images are intermingled. The furnace image logically expands the rebirth/refashioning imagery: after being refashioned in water, the damaged vessels were brought to the fire of the furnace. Although Theodore uses the comparison with the one-seed theory to disclose some aspects of this ineffable birth, he needs more tangible

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: *Les Homélies catéchétiques de Théodore de Mopsueste*, fo. 107r; trans. (with my corrections) at Mingana, *Commentary*, 57.

[31] For Theodore's image of refashioning of potter's vessels as acquiring immutability see Sofia Puchkova, 'Baptism and the two ages: how Theodore of Mopsuestia chose biblical images for his explanation of baptism', *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* lxxiii (2021), 1–15.

[32] Mingana overlooked the negative Syriac *layt* here. French translation is 'il n'a plus': *Les Homélies catéchétiques*, 429.

[33] ܐܝܟܢܐ ܕܡܐܢܐ ܕܗ̇ܘܐ ܡܢ ܦܚܪܐ܆ ܡܬܬܩܢ ܗܘ̣ ܘܡܬܚܕܬ ܒܡܝܐ ܟܠ ܟܡܐ ܕܒܟܝܢܐ܆ ܘܡܟܐ ܕܩܝܡ ܒܛܝܢܗ ܘܡܟܝܟ ܢܦܫܐ ܘܦܠܚܐ ܐܬܬܘܗܝ، ܘܠܐ ܐܫܬܘܬܦ ܠܟܝܢܐ ܕܢܘܪܐ: ܟܕ ܕܝܢ ܕܟܠ ܐܫܬܠܩ ܒܢܘܪܐ: ܕܠܝܬ ܠܬܘܒ ܠܡܬܚܕܬܘ ܠܫܪܐ ܡܬܚܕܬ ܢܬܬܩܢ ܡܛܠ ܟܠ ܠܝܬ ܠܗ ܦܘܪܣܐ܆ ܗܟܢܐ ܐܦܝܢ ܗܫܐ ܡܛܠ ܕܟܝܢܐ ܡܝܘܬܐ ܐܝܬܝܢ. ܘܠܐܝܬ ܠܚܘܕܬܐ ܕܟܝܢ ܡܩܒܠܝܢܢ ܒܡܥܡܘܕܝܬܐ. ܟܕ ܕܝܢ ܕܡܬܚܕܬܝܢ ܐܝܬ ܟܠܗܝܢ ܒܗ ܡܥܡܘܕܝܬܐ: ܘܡܩܒܠܝܢ ܠܛܝܒܘܬܐ ܕܪܘܚܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ. ܕܡܬܪ ܡܢ ܟܠ ܢܘܪܐ ܕܐܝܬ ܡܫܪܪܐ ܠܢ. ܠܐ ܡܟܝܠ ܡܩܒܠܝܢ ܚܘܕܬܐ ܕܬܪܝܢ. ܡܕܡ ܐܦ ܠܐ ܡܥܡܘܕܝܬܐ ܐܚܪܬܐ ܡܣܟܝܢ.

: *Les Homélies catéchétiques*, fo. 108r; trans. with my corrections by Mingana at *Commentary*, 57–8 (italics mine).

images than birth and womb in order to explain the baptismal change to his catechumens. He proceeds then to the metaphors of vessel-making and firing in the furnace. The rebirth/refashioning and 'firing in the furnace' happen in baptismal water at the same moment of baptism. It seems that the same tradition that informed Ps-Ephrem's imagery and Chrysostom's catechetical treatment of rebirth images is reflected in Theodore's linked womb and furnace metaphors. Most likely, this baptismal tradition goes back to the pre-Christian imagining of the female womb as a furnace.

Later Syriac sources

In the late fifth-century metrical homilies (*memre*) of Narsai of Nisibis and Jacob of Sarug, one finds many attestations of furnace and womb imagery; however, they are used separately in these sources.[34] For example, in Narsai, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the priest purifies the baptised, as if recasting them and purging the rust from the body and soul:

> *As in a furnace (ܟܘܟܐ), he recasts bodies in baptism,*
> *And as in a fire, he consumes the weeds of mortality.*
> *The drug of the Spirit he casts into the water, as into a furnace (ܟܘܟܐ ܕܢܘܪ),*
> *And he purifies the image of man from uncleanness.*
> *By the heat of the Spirit, he purges the rust of the body and soul.*
> *And instead of clay, they acquire the hue of heavenly things.*[35]

The womb theme is developed separately. Narsai is surprised by the fact that the non-sentient nature of water is capable of begetting rational creatures:

> *Who ever heard that kind should bring forth that which was not that kind,*
> *as now a senseless nature (brings forth) the rational? ...*
> *This is a wonder and, as we may say, full of astonishment,*
> *that the womb of the water should conceive and bring forth babes full grown.*[36]

Jacob of Sarug also treats the furnace and womb metaphors separately, even if he mentions them on the same page. In his *memra* on holy baptism, the baptismal 'womb' sanctifies and the baptismal 'furnace' gives immortality:

[34] Brock, *The Holy Spirit*, 85–7.

[35] *Narsai doctoris syri homiliae et carmina*, i, ed. A. Mingana, Mosul 1905, 343–4; trans. R. H. Connolly at *The liturgical homilies of Narsai*, Cambridge 1909, 48–9; cf. *Narsai homiliae et carmina*, i. 356. See also Nathan Witkamp, *Tradition and innovation: baptismal rite and mystagogy in Theodore of Mopsuestia and Narsai of Nisibis*, Leiden 2018, 322.

[36] *Narsai homiliae et carmina*, i. 341; trans. Connolly at *The liturgical homilies of Narsai*, 46; cf. Witkamp, *Tradition and innovation*, 323.

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Baptism is the womb that gives birth to the saved every day
And sanctifies them so that they may become the brothers of the Only-begotten.
...
Baptism is the huge furnace (ܟܘܪܐ) filled with fire,
And by this fire, humans are tried so that they become immortal.[37]

Although there are few attestations of the joint imagery of the furnace and womb in the early Middle Ages, these images are found together in the *Commentary on baptism* of the twelve-century writer and polymath Dionysius Bar Salibi. Starting with the image of the womb, he asks, echoing Nicodemus, 'How can a man be born twice?' Bar Salibi's argumentation somewhat reminds us of Chrysostom's. Why does the water cleanse sin? It is not ordinary water, but the fire hidden in water that burns sin. Like Ps-Ephrem, he recalls the Babylonian furnace from the Book of Daniel, and as in Narsai and Chrysostom, Bar Salibi's 'furnace' is the crucible that cleans metals from rust. He states:

Spiritual birth begets the spiritual beings, as says John: 'not from blood, nor from the desire of man, but from God' [John i.13] he is born. Do not think of earthly thoughts and say, 'How is a man born twice?' Do not say, 'How does the water cleanse the sins?' It is not in ordinary water that you are baptised. (But) hidden fire abides in the water, (the fire) that burns the sins and protects the purity of the bodies as iron is preserved in the fire, but its rust is cleansed. Let the fire of Babylonians instruct you; (the fire) that consumed (their) fetters and preserved (their) hair [Dan iii.27], as the symbol of baptism that consumes sins and protects bodies.[38]

Although in Dionysius' text one observes the rare instance of the joint use of the furnace and womb imagery, later authors rarely treat them jointly. Yet, all three authors clearly build upon the established traditional imagery, which has its roots in the Bible, ordinary life and non-Christian literature.

Non-Christian sources

The knowledge of inner body parts and functions was relatively vague in antiquity because the ancients generally did not practise dissection. They

[37] *Homiliae selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, i, ed. Paul Bendjan, with additional material by S. Brock, Piscataway, NJ 2006, 197 (trans. mine). There are other instances of the womb and furnace imagery in Jacob, *Homiliae selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, i.168, 171, 181, 198, 203; ii. 885; iii. 374; cf. Sebastian Brock, 'Baptismal themes in the writings of Jacob of Sarug', in *Symposium Syriacum 1976*, Rome 1978, 334, 337.

[38] *Commentary on baptism* 4.2, in Dionysios Bar Salibi, *Commentary on myron and baptism*, ed. and trans. Baby Varghese, Kerala 2006, 107; trans at p. 106 (some amendments to the English of Varghese's translation are mine, for example, 'begets' instead of 'gives birth' in the first line).

received information about human organs either from the observation of injuries, including battle wounds, or from animal anatomy, an understanding of which was acquired through butchery and haruspicy. Additionally, the study of externally visible symptoms helped in deducing the processes that happened inside the body. Hence, due to the lack of precise knowledge, the inner body was frequently described through metaphors and comparisons with objects of daily life and natural phenomena. For example, a wide range of metaphors was ascribed to the female body and sexual organs. The ancients compared the woman's body to the earth or land to be cultivated and to a cultivated furrow, which would bring the fruit of the earth. The female womb is similar to a container (a jar or a cup) in which the foetus grows as a plant, to a house where it lives and to a furnace in which the foetus is cooked. The female body may be a passive receptive tablet, a *tabula rasa*, on which words should be written but it cannot produce the words on its own, and it may also be an unreceptive and untouchable stone if it is a virgin's body.[39]

Many of these metaphors are cross-cultural. The image of the house is common in Mesopotamian and late Jewish traditions: the Mesopotamians compared the womb to a house and a difficult birth to its closed doors; the rabbis considered it as a storehouse for the foetus.[40] The metaphor of the furnace is also encountered equally in classical Greek and Mesopotamian literature. Another image, related to it, the image of a jar or a container, is not only present in Mesopotamian but also in Greek and Egyptian culture.[41] This fact is significant because the Christian catechetical homilies of Chrysostom and Theodore that reflect

[39] For more on all these images of the female body see Ulrike Steinert, 'The concepts of the female body in Mesopotamian gynecological texts', in John Z. Wee (ed.), *The comparable body: analogy and metaphor in ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greco-Roman medicine*, Leiden–Boston 2017, 275–351; Helen King, *Hippocrates' woman: reading the female body in ancient Greece*, London–New York 1998, 33–9; Ann Hanson, 'Medical writers' woman', in D. M. Halperin, J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeitlin (eds), *Before sexuality: the construction of erotic experience in the ancient Greek world*, Princeton 1990, 317, 321, 325, 330; and Page DuBois, *Sowing the body: psychoanalysis and ancient representations of women*, Chicago–London 1988.

[40] Steinert, 'The concepts of the female body', 297–8; Lennart Lehmhaus, 'Bodies of texts, bodies of tradition: medical expertise and knowledge of the body among the rabbinic Jews in late antiquity', in J. Althoff, D. Berrens and T. Pommerening (eds), *Finding, inheriting or borrowing? The construction and transfer of knowledge in antiquity and the Middle Ages*, Bielefeld 2019, 138–46; Cynthia Baker, *Rebuilding the house of Israel: architectures of gender in Jewish antiquity*, Stanford, CA 2002, 34–76; Charlotte Fonrobert, *Menstrual purity: rabbinic and Christian reconstructions of biblical gender*, Stanford, CA 2000, 40–67.

[41] Steinert, 'The concepts of the female body', 299–303; King, *Hippocrates' woman*, 34–5.

the furnace imagery originate in Greek culture, while the Syriac hymns that contain it are attributed to Ephrem, a native of late ancient Mesopotamia. The furnace image has a long-standing history in both cultures being attested from the late third millennium until the fourth century BCE in Mesopotamia and from the fourth century BCE until the fourth century CE in Greek culture.

In Greek sources of various genres, the womb-furnace is mainly a baking oven where the semen is baked as bread.[42] For instance, in the Hippocratic *Nature of the child*, the womb is depicted as a warm place,[43] and the human seed resembles bread: as the bread has a crust on it, the seed, while developing, forms a membrane on the outer surface.[44] In Herodotus, the tyrant Periander's necrophilia is referred to by the oracle's words, '[he] had put his loaves into a cold oven',[45] in which 'loaves' may mean his semen and 'cold oven' the uterus of his dead wife (*Histories* v.92). Elsewhere in the *Histories*, an image of a woman baker alludes to a sexual partner (i. 51; iii. 151). Similarly, in Aristophanes, the process of baking and roasting refers to sexual intercourse (*The peace* 440, 891, 1137). In Hesiod, the woman roasts her husband without fire (*Erga* 705), withering him with her sexual desire.[46] In Aristotle, even though the female body is considered less hot than the male, the womb is compared to an oven. His *On generation of animals* contains the following passage: 'Once the animals have been fashioned, and one has got all the parts of the male and the other all the parts of the female, they were to be put into the uterus as though it were an oven (κάμινον).'[47] Additionally, the imagery of gestation as cooking is present in Aristotle (*Generation of animals* 743a5ff). For example, the males are cooked more quickly than the females because the former are naturally hotter than the latter (*Generation of animals* 775a10ff).

The furnace image is encountered in late antique authors as well. According to the *Interpretation of dreams* by Artemidorus of Daldis (second century CE), a hearth (ἑστία) and a baking oven (κλίβανος) are similar to a woman because they all receive things that are useful for life – apparently, dough and semen. The fire in a hearth that appears in a dream signifies

[42] DuBois, *Sowing the body*, 110–29.

[43] Hippocrates of Cos, *Nature of the child*, ed. and trans. Paul Potter, Boston, MA 2012, 30–5, 86–9.

[44] Ibid. 34–5.

[45] 'ὅτι ἐπὶ ψυχρὸν τὸν ἰπνὸν Περίανδρος τοὺς ἄρτους ἐπέβαλε': Herodotus, *Histories*. bk v, ed. and trans. P. J. Rhodes, Liverpool 2019, 130; trans. at p. 131.

[46] Cf. Anne Carson, 'Putting her in her place: woman, dirt, and desire', in Halperin, Winkler and Zeitlin, *Before sexuality*, 141.

[47] 'εἰ γὰρ πεπλασμένων τῶν ζῴων, τοῦ μὲν τὰ μόρια ἔχοντος τὰ τοῦ θήλεος πάντα, τοῦ δὲ τὰ τοῦ ἄρρενος, καθάπερ εἰς κάμινον εἰς τὴν ὑστέραν τεθείη': Aristotle, *De generatione animalium*, 764a, in *Generation of animals*, ed. H. J. Drossaart Lulofs, trans. A. L. Peck, 2014, 372, 374; trans. at pp. 373, 375.

that your wife will become pregnant (*Oneirocritica* 2.10).[48] The late antique travel writer Pausanias reports the ritual practices of consulting the oracle in the shrine of Trophonius: the consultant should descend underground through the mouth of a chasm that resembles an oven (κρίβανος), where he will hear the prophecy, and then ascend the same way as if being buried and born again (*Description of Greece* 9.39.9–10).[49] This example is particularly remarkable because it shows how the furnace image was integrated into cultic practices, which included descending and ascending in the same way as Christian baptism.

The most widespread image of the female uterus in Greco-Roman late antiquity, also connected to the furnace and cooking, is a jar, vase or cup turned upside-down. This image is encountered in medical authors of the second century, Soranus and Galen (*Gynaecology* 1.9; *On natural faculties* 3.3),[50] as well as in popular imagination visualised in magical uterine amulets.[51] As Helen King notes, Pandora's jar is clearly in the background of this imagery.[52] The first woman, Pandora is compared to a jar because she was fashioned from earth and water and she also opens a πίθος, a jar for storing food (*Erga* 94), which resulted in various calamities for the race of men. On the other hand, the food imagery, also related to Pandora, is encountered in pornographic works. Athenaeus, who seemed to have written his dialogue *Deipnosophistae* at the turn of the second and third centuries CE, compared women to food.[53] The quotations from Athenian comedies of the classical period are abundant in this work and this comparison is derived from them. Additionally, in the third-fourth century Greek alchemist Zosimos of Panopolis, one finds the metaphor of gestation as cooking in the womb. According to Zosimos, the womb is connected to the stomach, and the heat of the stomach cooks the semen.[54]

In the Mesopotamian ancient medical texts, one finds the female uterus compared to pottery and brewery ovens. Ulrike Steinert draws attention to the late Babylonian ritual text (fourth century BCE) in which a woman who suffers miscarriages embraces a pottery oven and asks to be given the ability

[48] Cf. Helen King, *Hippocrates' woman*, 33, and *Artemidorus' Oneirocritica: text, translation and commentary*, ed. and trans. Daniel E. Harris-McCoy, Oxford 2021, 170.

[49] DuBois, *Sowing the body*, 128. Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, iv, ed. R. E. Wycherley, trans. W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Ormerod, Boston, MA 2014, 348–55.

[50] Mary Harlow, 'Images of motherhood in late antiquity', unpubl. PhD diss. Leicester 1998, 38.

[51] Christopher Faraone, 'Magical and medical approaches to the wandering womb in the ancient Greek world', *Classical Antiquity* xxx/1 (2011), 7, 20; Hanson, 'Medical writers' woman', 324–5.

[52] King, *Hippocrates' woman*, 23.

[53] Magdalein Henry, 'Edible woman', in Amy Richlin (ed.), *Pornography and representation in Greece and Rome*, New York–Oxford 1992, 250–68.

[54] Zosimos of Panopolis, *Book of pictures; Muṣḥaf aṣ-ṣuwar*, ed. Theodore Abt, trans. Salwa Fuad and Theodore Abt, II/2, Zurich 2011, 173–4, 481, 486; Arabic text at 19ab, 173a, 175b.

to bring a child to term.[55] Her womb is compared to a pottery oven, which can be at times full and at times empty. However, while the oven is always productive and accomplishes the baking of pottery, the woman's womb is not perfect since sometimes it could not 'complete' the child. Another example of oven imagery is encountered in a Sumerian literary dialogue *Two scribes* (or *The class reunion)* from the Old Babylonian period, in which there is a reference to the oven where the sprouted barley was dried before brewing. The speaker calls his opponent in an insulting manner 'flour-malt spread out in the oven of mankind', meaning that he is not a human being but only 'foetal matter'.[56]

Related to the oven imagery, an image of a container, a pot, is also found in the Mesopotamian sources. Steinert indicates that the Sumerian word that stands for 'woman' and 'womb' means also a container that was used for production, such as a basin, crucible or mould.[57] The womb is represented as another container, a waterskin, in the ritual against gynaecological haemorrhage.[58] Additionally, infant burials in earthen pots with the head of the deceased at the pot's opening, as in the position of a foetus in the uterus before birth, were practised in Mesopotamia and throughout the Near East in the Middle Bronze Age.[59]

In Egyptian culture, among many images, the image of a pot or jar was also used to depict the uterus. As in Mesopotamia, infant burials in jars or pots were attested in Egypt.[60] At an early stage, the pot was employed as a hierographic symbol; for example, an image of a container with the added female *t* designated 'wife'.[61] The name of the snake goddess Qerehet, who began to be worshipped in the Middle Kingdom, in the Old Kingdom, referred to a womb but it also meant a jar.[62] In Greco-Roman Egypt, one finds a jar symbol in uterine amulets, dating between the first century BC and the fourth century CE.[63] The Ptolemaic Papyrus Salt contains a recipe for making a written amulet with a depiction of the

[55] Steinert, 'The concepts of the female body', 320–1.
[56] Ibid. 322.
[57] Ibid. 300.
[58] Ibid. 301.
[59] S. Kulemann-Ossen and M. Novák, 'Kūbu und das "Kind im Topf": zur Symbolik von Topfbestattungen', *Altorientalische Forschungen* xxvii (2000), 121–31; D. Ilan, 'Mortuary practices at Tel Dan in the Middle Bronze Age: a reflection of Canaanite society and ideology', in S. Campbell and A. Green (eds.), *Archaeology of death in the ancient Near East*, Oxford 1995, 117–37; cf. Steinert, 'The concepts of the female body', 302.
[60] Lise Manniche, 'Depicting the unseen: the womb in Egyptian representation: from space to object', in Nozomu Kawai and Benedict G. Davies (eds), *The star who appears in Thebes: studies in honour of Jiro Kondo*, Wallasey 2022, 262.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Cathie Spieser, 'Aspects of the womb and embracing the dead in Ancient Egypt', in Erica Couto-Ferreira and Lorenzo Verderame (eds), *Cultural constructions of the uterus in pre-modern societies, past and present*, Newcastle upon Tyne 2018, 87–8.
[63] Manniche, 'Depicting the unseen', 263.

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uterus as a jar. Additionally, in a hymn in the temple of Esna, the womb is designated with the word that also stands for a jar.[64]

In conclusion, there are several features of the ancient perception of the womb as a furnace. First, the womb of a living body is a warm place, the furnace with fire that can produce life, whereas the womb of a dead woman resembles a cold oven. Second, the womb and the furnace receive 'the things useful for life'; hence, it is a receptacle and a container. Finally, the late Babylonian ritual text highlights the productivity of the furnace and the potential productivity of the womb. The late Babylonian ritual ascribes constant productivity to the furnace itself; there is no emphasis on male semen. Steinert concludes that the pottery and brewery oven imagery, derived from the field of women's craft, depict the female body as agents in gestation and giving birth.[65]

Since the furnace-womb metaphor survived almost two millennia in Mesopotamia and was also known in the late Roman Empire in the third century CE, this image is highly conservative and may have survived further into the early Middle Ages. Hence, it was most likely a part of the cultural background of those who introduced the furnace imagery into Syrian poetry and baptismal catechesis.

The womb and furnace metaphors in light of women's studies

The pre-Christian origins of baptismal metaphors have been a mystery for the scholarly world until now. Without denying the influences of Scripture and daily life on the invention of the furnace image, this article has shown that this image has a long pre-Christian history, which must have had an impact on the baptismal 'furnace' imagery. In the non-Christian sources, the female womb is compared to the furnace. In some baptismal Christian sources, the furnace imagery retains the connection to the womb. In the Greek Antiochene authors, the furnace metaphor clarifies the rebirth imagery; in Ps-Ephrem, the notion of 'womb of flame' is used to depict the furnace. Both metaphors are applied to the reality of the baptismal font. This section will argue that, based on the pre-Christian history of the womb and furnace, the baptismal image of the furnace is also female, which allows us to highlight a new perspective on female agency in baptism.

The womb and the mother are major feminine baptismal images attested in late antique sources. The womb image, being a derivative of rich rebirth baptismal imagery,[66] is widely attested in baptismal sources in the late antique East and West. It has clear biblical roots ('birth from above',

[64] Ibid.

[65] Steinert, 'The concepts of the female body', 341–2.

[66] For more on the baptismal rebirth imagery see Riley, *Christian initiation*, 298–341 and Jensen, *Baptismal imagery in early Christianity*, 137–76.

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John iii.1–9; 'bath of regeneration', Titus iii.5) and is based on the comparison between the physiological birth and the spiritual renewal that the baptised experience while immersed in the baptismal pool. Some sources refer to baptismal water and a baptismal pool as the womb of the Mother Church,[67] yet others, like Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia, speak about a womb as a 'disembodied' organ whose function is to regenerate. The womb image is encountered in the written sources[68] as well as in the architecture of baptismal pools. Scholars believe that the round shape of some baptisteries alludes to the mother's womb and the idea of being born from above in baptism.[69] Some other baptisteries have a unique elongated shape, which bears a physiological resemblance to the female vulva.[70] The baptised entered these baptisteries from one end and emerged from another as if from the mother's womb. As Robin Jensen maintains, the womb and Mother Church images indicate that baptismal regeneration, perfect fecundity and endless procreation, since the Church is the Mother of all Christians, are the major roles ascribed to female agency in baptism.[71]

The furnace image in the non-Christian sources has a similar function, namely procreation since it refers to a physiological female organ. However, with a contextual change from physiological to baptismal, the furnace metaphor begins to function in a new way. In the pre-Christian sources, the womb-furnace is a passive receptacle, a warm container, which has perfect productivity. By contrast, Christian Syrian poetry and baptismal catechesis ascribe to the furnace such qualities as purification and complete renewal accomplished by the agency of the Holy Spirit. The author of the hymns on Epiphany portrays a baptismal pool as a furnace or 'the womb of flame' that can purify those who enter it and dissolve the bonds of 'the earthly one', namely all that ties them to earth. He depicts the furnace in the story of the three young men in the fiery furnace as a crucible that cleanses those who entered. This imagery echoes Cyril's 'crucible' of exorcisms and Chrysostom's 'furnace' that compares the baptised to an impure gold, stained metal vessel and golden statue, which is

[67] For example, Ps-Didymus, *De trinitate* II.13, *PG* xxxix.692; Zeno of Verona, *Tractatus I.55*, in *Zenonis Veronensis tractatus*, ed. B. Löfstedt, CCSL xxii, Turnhout 1971, 130.

[68] For example, Ephrem, *De virginitate* 7.5–7, *De Ecclesia* 36.3; Chrysostom, *In Iohannem homilia* xxvi, *Un évangile pré-johannique. II. Jean 2:13–4:54*, ed. M.-É. Boismard, Paris 1994, 54; *Anonymous East Syrian liturgical commentary* 12, in Sebastian Brock, 'Some early Christian baptismal commentaries', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* xlvi (1980), 40. For a review on the rebirth imagery in Greco-Syriac sources see Sofia Puchkova, 'Baptismal water as the mother's womb: the reception of a liturgical metaphor in Theodore of Mopsuestia's biblical exegesis', *Parole de l'Orient* xlix (2023), 169–90.

[69] Jensen, *Baptismal imagery in early Christianity*, 162–5.

[70] Ibid. 165.

[71] Robin M. Jensen, 'Mater ecclesia and fons aeterna: the Church and her womb in ancient Christian tradition', in Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (eds), *A feminist companion to patristic literature*, London 2008, 152.

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melted in the crucible and utterly renewed. Chrysostom insists that the baptismal bath not only purifies sins, but recreates the entire nature of the baptised. Theodore of Mopsuestia supplies this purification/renewal motive with the peculiar idea of the 'strengthening' or 'hardening'/'baking' of human nature in the baptismal furnace. This 'baking' directly relates to the acquisition of the first fruits of immutability, namely of a permanent inclination of the human will toward good. Therefore, in Theodore, the baptismal furnace not only purifies but also gives the potential not to sin. To sum up, purifying, dissolving the earthly bonds, totally renewing and rendering immutable are virtues of baptism that the furnace imagery illustrates. None of these qualities is mentioned in the sources in which the furnace is a physiological metaphor describing the female uterus.

Given the common history of the furnace and womb imagery and their intrinsic interconnectedness in some Christian sources, the baptismal furnace image should be considered as feminine. On a deeper level, this furnace remains the womb. In Christian baptismal sources, the well-known feminine metaphor is the metaphor of womb and mother, which involves the idea of multiple pregnancies, for example, the womb that gives birth every day in Ps-Ephrem.[72] However, if the baptismal furnace illustrates female agency in baptism, what kind of agency is it? The agency is not limited to the physiological functions of a woman but relates to restoration, purification and the acquisition of sinless life.

These functions of the feminine furnace significantly widen the range of the activities that the feminine baptismal metaphors usually describe. The focus on the sole physiological productivity of the baptismal womb has shifted. Not only does the feminine furnace fashion the baptised anew as if giving birth to them, but also, and most importantly, it purifies the impure and gives the inclination towards good to the sinful. In the contemporary world, in which women are widely engaged in the public sphere as engineers, scientists, architects etc., the feminine image of baptism that recreates, repairs, cleanses and makes the unstable stable sounds more appealing and empowering. The insights of this article will be helpful for those who provide catechesis and pastoral care to today's women.

[72] For more similar imagery see ibid. 137–55.