CHAPTER EIGHT

CHILDREN’S AGE

The Assyrians customarily defined children by their height and their state of dependence on their mother (as pointed out in chapter III). Adolescent or adult sons are defined by the term ša = šahurtu and adolescent daughters by ša or batūsu. Younger children are presented by their height: three, four, or five spans’, sometimes with the addition of the term rutu, probably about 25 cm. In other texts the scribe uses two additional numbers, two and six (SLAB 9 92B: 4; ND 2485).¹ This is very likely only a general estimate. The last two definitions are “weaned” (UD = pir, piršu) and “suckling” (GA = ša zizibi). The term ša = šahurtu in a few texts refers to an adult son, as clearly indicated by SAA XI 202, II: 16–23 (text no. 135 = family no. 288): this text defines a married son who already has begot his own baby by the term ša = šahurtu.

The distinction between the categories “weaned” and “3” is especially unclear since a newborn baby was probably about two spans in length, ca. 50 cm., and most babies probably reached the length of about three spans (ca. 75 cm.) during their first year, so one might suppose that breastfeeding, which was probably widely practiced in all Ancient Near Eastern societies, stopped during the child’s first year.² Accordingly, one might suggest that the terms UD (weaned) and “3” may be interchangeable, and refer to children independent of their mother’s or wet nurse’s breastfeeding; similarly, the terms “2” and “GA” (suckling) are synonyms because, as mentioned above, a newborn baby was about two spans’ long. On the other hand, sometimes scribes define two children in the same family by the terms UD and “3”, so at least

² The WFS indicates that a large majority of women, particularly in Africa and Asia, breastfeed their children usually between one and two and a half years (see Cleland—Scott, 1987, p. 1002). Stol (2000, pp. 181, 190) states that in the Ancient Near East “children were nursed for two or three years”.

in his opinion these terms were probably not synonyms. One possible explanation for this complex issue might be related to the unfixed and vague nature of these terms, like the others, “4” or “5”, which are also very general definitions which might refer to children of various ages that look like a “4”-span child or a “5”-span child.

The size/“age” of 147 children are attested in the texts studied in this book (see Table 36): 136 of them feature in five groups (Slaves, “Land and People”, Royal grants, The Harran Census, and Deportees), and the remaining eleven are enumerated in lists of “Fathers and Sons” of the Harran Census. About two thirds are sons, and only one third—daughters. In the Slave group the age of only 22 children (17%) is mentioned; a similar ratio (nine children, 18%) is attested in the group of “Land and People”. In the Deportee group the age of 36 children (48%) is attested; and in the Harran Census the age of about 50% of the children is indicated (in Scribe A’s texts the figure is 95%). In the Royal grants group the age of only eleven children is mentioned (probably a very low percentage of the children in this group).

Note that the level of infant and child mortality in the Ancient Near East was relatively high, so the number of children attested in these texts obviously does not indicate the number of children actually given birth by the family’s mother.3

On the other hand, measures of population control are clearly evident in Ancient Near Eastern texts, so in the following discussion it is supposed that family planning was usual in the Neo-Assyrian period.4

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3 On infant mortality in the Ancient Near East see Robbins, 1999, p. 58, and note 16.

The rate of infant mortality in the Ancient Near East is unclear, but it is reasonable to suppose that it was not very different from the rate in pre-industrial societies in Europe in the 17th–18th centuries A.D. or in several developing countries in Africa or the Middle East in the 20th century. The WFS indicates that the level of infant and child mortality of children under five in Senegal in 1975–1979 was 26%, in Yemen 23%, and in Nepal 23% (see Cleland—Scott, 1987, pp. 868–869). In Egypt and Turkey (in the same period) the rate of infant mortality of children in their first year of life was about 13%, and of children under five 17%–19%. The rates in northern France and in the Paris Basin in the 17th–18th centuries were similar: 21%–28.8% (Flandrin, 1979, p. 198, and see also p. 59). In the same regions of France in the 20th century the rate of infant mortality was only about 3%. See also Beaver, 1973, pp. 243–254.