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# Midwife Diplomacy. The Recruitment of a Midwife for Empress Margarita María Teresa de Austria (1666-1673)\*

*Comadreo diplomático. La contratación de una matrona para la emperatriz Margarita María Teresa de Austria (1666-1673)*

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**Abstract:** During her stay in Vienna, from 1666-1673, empress Margarita María Teresa de Austria, who was of Spanish origins, gave birth four times and died when she was pregnant with a fifth child. The question of what midwife would best serve her was repeatedly discussed at the highest diplomatic level. The reputation of these midwives depended not only on their performance in the delivery room. Royal midwifery was linked to culture and language, to the intrigues of rivaling parties at court or frictions between the different branches of the Casa de Austria. Midwifery thus offers the opportunity to study from a new perspective the mechanisms of dynastic alliances and the symbolic value attributed to the body of female aristocrats.

**Keywords:** Midwifery. Obstetrics. Spanish Court. Imperial Court. Ambassadors. Margarita María de Austria. Leopold I of Austria. Ambassador Franz Eusebius von Pötting. Ana d'Avalos. Lucía Panesi

**Resumen:** Durante su estancia en Viena, entre 1666-1673, la emperatriz, Margarita María Teresa de Austria dio a luz cuatro hijos y murió embarazada del quinto. En todos los casos la elección de la comadrona dio lugar a discusiones y debates al más alto nivel diplomático. La reputación y elección de las parteras dependía no solo de su profesionalidad. Las comadronas reales estaban ligadas a una cultura y a un lenguaje, a las intrigas entre las facciones de la corte y entre las diferentes ramas de la Casa de Austria. Pero esto nos ofrece, además, la oportunidad de estudiar, desde una nueva perspectiva, los mecanismos de las alianzas dinásticas y el valor simbólico que se atribuía al cuerpo de las mujeres de la aristocracia.

**Palabras clave:** Matronería. Obstetricia. Corte española. Corte imperial. Embajadoras. Margarita María de Austria. Leopoldo I de Austria. Embajador Franz Eusebius von Pötting. Ana d'Avalos. Lucía Panesi

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## INTRODUCTION

A good midwife very much enhanced the chances of a successful delivery and of obtaining healthy offspring. This is what emperor Leopold I of Austria thought when he married his niece Margarita María Teresa de Austria in 1666; he was determined to procure the best possible obstetrical care for his very young wife, and he intervened in the matter personally. His correspondence includes a number of references to midwives, their hiring and payment, the qualifications required from them and the specific conditions under which they had to practise at the court of Vienna. Leopold's letters shed light on the networks of communication and patronage for court midwives and provide information about the people concerned with their employment and entitled to judge their performance.

The temporal frame of this study starts with the arrival of empress Margarita in Vienna in November 1666 and ends with her death in March 1673. During this time, two midwives were recorded in the service of the imperial couple, negotiations were initiated with two more members of the profession. In what follows, we shall establish the sequence of events in their obstetrical careers in relation to the succession of pregnancies, births, and deaths at the court of Vienna. We shall examine the hidden and apparent considerations that led to the recruitment of the women who had to gain the confidence of the empress, to accompany her periods of gestation and to make the right decisions during delivery and when attending the new-born child. We shall also look at the circumstances, occurrences, and judgements that could lead to the dismissal of a birth assistant.

The key figure in the story is the empress, Margarita María (1651-1673), who had seven pregnancies during the years she spent at the court of Vienna; the main interested party was her husband, the pious German emperor Leopold I (1640-1705). Important roles are played by count Franz Eusebius von Pötting, Austrian ambassador at the court of Madrid, by don Baltasar de la Cueva Enríquez, count Castellar, Spanish ambassador in Vienna and by Mariana de Austria (1634-1696), queen regent of Spain, sister of Leopold and mother of Margarita María. Leopold's second cousin, archduchess Claudia Felicitas of Austria-Tyrol (1653-1676) does not have any active part in the events, but great influences on the considerations and decisions of others. She was to become Leopold's second wife in 1673. The midwives in the drama are the following: Ana d'Avalos, born in Milan, but of Spanish origin, residing in Vienna from 1666 to 1672; Ana Sevillana and one doña Gracia, whose residence in Madrid in 1672 is indicated by

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the sources consulted; Lucía Panesi, of Genoese origin, practising her profession in Madrid until 1672 and in Vienna from January 1673 until September 1673.

Leopold's correspondence with his ambassador in Spain, count Pötting, will provide data for reconstructing the sequence of events. What we shall mainly deal with therefore is the emperor's version of the story, what we shall comment upon is his interpretation of events. Other testimonies and studies concerned with the matter will be used in order to provide other perspectives and more than one voice.

It is not necessary to say that birth is a crucial issue at any time, in any culture and that some basic characteristics have not changed since the 17th century. However, it is never just a corporeal process. Interests held by the community are at stake; thus, birth is related to religion, to law, to the most vital interests of a hereditary monarchy. Therefore, the ways birth is dealt with in public discourse strongly diverge from one historical moment to another. The Casa de Austria provides an example of a dynasty dealing with procreation in a moment of acute dynastic crisis. Aspects of the social processing of birth are thus highlighted and made explicit, when they were possibly also present and relevant in other contexts but treated with more discretion and resolved with less drama and conflict. Aspects of the work of a midwife thus become visible which remain hidden under less pressing circumstances and did not find their way into sources destined to survive in the archives of the rich and mighty.

### I. NEGOTIATING FOR A MIDWIFE: ANA SEVILLANA, DOÑA GRACIA, LUCÍA PANESI

In a letter dated 20 April 1672 Leopold for the first time asks his Spanish ambassador, count Franz Eusebius von Pötting, to look out for a Spanish midwife<sup>1</sup>. Leopold explains that, given his 'habitual application', there should soon be a request for assistance with birth. Since the ambassador's wife, he continues, has given birth twice during the couple's stay in Madrid, she should be acquainted with local midwives. If none could be found in Madrid, there should be others available elsewhere, especially the ones in Seville were said to be very good<sup>2</sup>. The emperor points out that he has already written to the queen of Spain on the matter. A first offer, he goes on, concerning working conditions and payment has been made to Madrid<sup>3</sup>. Finally, Leopold insists that Pötting should commit himself

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<sup>1</sup> Emperor Leopold I to count Franz Eusebius von Pötting, 20 April 1672. The letter can be read in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 227. Translations W. A. The circumstances and negotiations leading to the employment of a new midwife in 1672 and 1673 are referred in Ramírez de Villa-Urrutia, 1905, pp. 90-92; Oliván Santalíestra, 2011, pp. 837-908, specially 895.

<sup>2</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 20 April 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 227.

<sup>3</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 20 April 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 228.

personally and vigorously to the issue, urging him to seek the Spanish queen's midwife.

Answering on 25 May 1672, Pötting assures the emperor that everything has been put in motion according to his wishes<sup>4</sup>. In Spain, he reports, there was no lack of exceedingly experienced midwives. However, the queen would have to make use of her authority in order to persuade the one selected to leave the country, as people in Spain were overly attached to their fatherland, and did not like to go abroad. Besides, it would be necessary for the emperor to raise his financial offer, since midwives in Spain benefitted greatly from their profession. One of them earned 6,000 to 8,000 or even 10,000 ducats a year and he himself had paid 500 thalers to his midwife for the births of two children, son and daughter, the duke of Osuna 1,600 thalers for a son. And the late queen's midwife left 88,000 ducats cash when she died<sup>5</sup>.

The queen, Pötting adds, has been informed about the reasons which turned the employment of a Spanish midwife into a necessary and urgent issue. Both he and Mariana, the queen, share the emperor's indignation about the malign rumour spread at the Court of Vienna. We shall later return to this point<sup>6</sup>.

On 8 June 1672, Pötting, communicated a first successful arrangement: a midwife has been appointed: one comadre Sevillana, who was considered to be the best and most qualified midwife in Spain. However, he feared that she would drive a hard bargain, as she was leaving behind a very comfortable situation. Nothing would be determined, though, without the emperor's consent and all would be done so that the midwife embarked on her journey as soon as possible<sup>7</sup>.

Leopold, in a letter from 15 July 1672, comments favourably on the appointment, alleging that doña Ana Sevillana was also praised much by the Spanish ladies in Vienna. He is aware of the high cost but proposes that expenses could be shared between him and the queen. The emperor once more requests to be informed about everything and to be kept up to date<sup>8</sup>.

Pötting, 22 June 1672: The comadre Sevillana, who had been appointed, has been afflicted by gout in her hands and feet. She was still willing to move to Vienna if his majesty wished so, but considered it necessary to be accompanied by a good assistant. The queen, however, had resolved that given the unexpected

<sup>4</sup> Count Franz Eusebius von Pötting to emperor Leopold I, 25 May 1672, Vienna, Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Große Korrespondenz 38-3, fol. 1070-1072.

<sup>5</sup> Pötting to Leopold I, 25 May 1672, GK 38-3, fol. 1070-1072.

<sup>6</sup> Pötting to Leopold I, 25 May 1672, GK 38-3, fol. 1070-1072.

<sup>7</sup> Pötting to Leopold I, 8 June 1672, GK 38-3, fol. 1075.

<sup>8</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 15 July 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 248.

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impediment, another suitable midwife should take charge. Accordingly, he continued to pursue the matter with all possible diligence and stamina<sup>9</sup>.

Leopold, 27 July 1672: It was for the best that the midwife Sevillana had been afflicted by gout over there in Spain, for what use would he have had in Vienna for a misshapen midwife. There was no need for an assistant and it was very well that the queen was now looking for a replacement<sup>10</sup>.

On 6 July 1672 the Spanish ambassador states: The midwife who had come second in qualification and reputation, one doña Gracia could on no account be persuaded to accept the charge. Therefore, doctors at court had proposed one Lucía Panesi, who was also prepared to go to Austria. Though less famous than the other two, she was sufficiently approved and had been employed by diverse ladies of high rank. He was to start negotiating with her on the following days. Pötting expresses his hopes that Lucía would agree to more reasonable conditions than the former candidates<sup>11</sup>. The midwife in question could take the opportunity to journey to Milan with the count of Osuna's bride, from there to Innsbruck and from Hall onwards she could travel 'by water'.

Subsequent letters posted to Vienna by Pötting in July express a highly favourable judgement of Lucía Panesi's character —exceedingly good manners, discretion, little self-interest and information concerning the candidate's origins. Pötting now also reveals the woman's origins, both parents came from Genoa<sup>12</sup>. This fact seemed to have preoccupied the Spanish queen Mariana. But considering that doña Lucía Panesi was born in Madrid and had never left the town in her life, where she had exercised midwifery for 38 years and that a more competent one could not be found, Mariana had let him know that she had resolved this not to be a sufficient obstacle for the appointment<sup>13</sup>.

In these letters, Pötting also clarifies working conditions: a salary of 200 doubloons per year had been agreed upon, charges and daily rations at Court for her husband and son; free board in Vienna, for herself, her husband and the one son who would accompany her as well as two servants. As for extra payments and gifts on the occasion of the birth of a prince, —doña Lucía left it up to the emperor's judgement. The queen had expressed her astonishment about these demands which though higher than what Leopold was accustomed to pay for the empress's former midwife, were considered very modest by Spanish standards<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Pötting to Leopold I, 22 June 1672, GK 38-3, fol. 1080-1081.

<sup>10</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 27 July 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 252.

<sup>11</sup> Pötting to Leopold I, 6 July 1672, GK 38-3, fol. 1083.

<sup>12</sup> Pötting to Leopold I, 21 July 1672, GK 38-3, fol. 1089.

<sup>13</sup> Pötting to Leopold I, 31 Aug. 1672, GK 38-3, fol. 1101.

<sup>14</sup> Pötting to Leopold I, 21 July 1672, GK 38-3, fol. 1089.

Leopold consented to what had been worked out in Madrid. It is true, he states, that the former birth assistant had cost 1,000 florins less, but he did not even want to imagine what he would have had to pay for Ana Sevillana: 10,000 florins would probably not have been enough<sup>15</sup>.

On 23 September 1672, according to Pötting's letters dated from 14 and 28 September 1672, the above-mentioned bride of the duke of Osuna leaves Madrid together with an entourage of 200 persons<sup>16</sup>. Lucía Panesi, her husband, son, two male and two female servants are part of the convoy heading for Milan and Vienna. Witnesses testify to the fact that she has abandoned Madrid personally. It is only after they have testified to this departure that daily payment to her close kin is initiated by the Spanish palace administrators<sup>17</sup>.

Lucía Panesi, according to Leopold's account, arrived in Vienna on 11 January 1673. Very conveniently, the empress's menses was 20 days overdue and for nine days she had suffered from nausea and vomits<sup>18</sup>. On 8 March Leopold communicates serious concern about a cold that had lasted for three weeks and affected the empress's throat. Margarita died four days later, on 12 March 1673. In his calendar, Leopold noted that her death had occurred at two o'clock in the morning, that she had been pregnant and that a dead son had been found in her womb<sup>19</sup>. Lucía Panesi left Vienna on 28 September. Leopold married again on 15 October and on 20 December of the same year wrote to Madrid that his second wife, Claudia Felicitas of Austria-Tyrol was expecting a child<sup>20</sup>.

## 2. AMBASSADRESS, AMBASSADOR, QUEEN MOTHER

Our case involves a Spanish midwife to be hired for a Spanish infanta who has become empress at the court of Vienna. The Imperial ambassador at the Spanish court played a crucial role in her recruitment. He gathered information concerning possible candidates and their reputations, he targeted the most suitable ones, entering into talks with female professionals who were well aware of their status and set high standards with respect to payment and working conditions. Spanish midwives knew that their expertise was highly appreciated. Housing, wages, bonus payments or the promotion of family members all had to be

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<sup>15</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 10 Aug. 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 257.

<sup>16</sup> Pötting to Leopold I, 28 Sep. 1672, GK 38-3, fol. 1112; Pötting to Leopold, 14 Sep. 1672, GK 38-3, fol. 1107.

<sup>17</sup> On Lucía's son, Pedro José García, see Novo Zaballo, 2015, p. 306.

<sup>18</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 11 Jan. 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 292.

<sup>19</sup> See Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 305, footnote 1.

<sup>20</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 20 Dec. 1673, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 383.

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carefully and tenaciously negotiated. It was not easy to lure a Spanish birth attendant to undertake the burdensome voyage to cold, northern regions, close to the eastern borders of the Christian world. As we saw above, not every midwife was ready to go, and once determined to decline the offer, not even the queen's intervention could make them change their mind.

Which information did the ambassador rely on when he first approached candidates for the job? Rumours may have been as important as they were in all other matters communicated in a social world which, much as it was obsessed with letters and incipient forms of journalism, engaged in an endless chain of personal encounters and conversations: visits, festivals, comedies, church ceremonies<sup>21</sup>. Madrid was the centre of a world empire, it is true, but it did not consist of more than a few dozens of streets with tiny houses and big orchards, crammed in between huge churches, convents, hospitals, stables, and palaces. A small world from our perspective, where face-to-face contact and chance meetings on a coach-ride or a *paseo* were quite normal.

There is another factor which Western scholars are liable to underrate. Early modern contemporaries were constantly involved in questions of fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, and the care of infants. They were either concerned as parents, expecting, going through the ordeal of birth or attending the event as siblings or grandparents of the infant, mourning the early death of a child, struggling with the traces which birth had left on their bodies, when they were mothers, hoping for pregnancy or being afraid that it might occur. Furthermore, they were also constantly attending rites and ceremonies which surrounded the births of their numerous kin, their friends, neighbours, servants or masters, godparents or godchildren. They complied with the forms of sociability which preceded and followed birth, to provide comfort, spiritual assistance, to dry tears, to celebrate and by doing all this, to strengthen ties of kin, friendship or loyalty. Personal letters and diaries are replete with references to all these cultural aspects of procreation<sup>22</sup>. A number of entries in Pötting's diary, for instance, comment upon his wife, who visits another noble woman at court during her lying-in period or while she is at her sickbed after a miscarriage<sup>23</sup>. It might have been during one of these visits that the ambassadress, Marie Sophie von Pötting, née Dietrichstein, became acquainted with a midwife called Ana Sevillana or *comadre de Sevilla*. Pötting's note indicates that the midwife attended his spouse when there was 'suspicion' that she might be with child in April 1664, that is at a very early stage of

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<sup>21</sup> See Olivari, 2014; Funes de Villalpando, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Pötting, *Diario*, I, pp. 70-73, 151, 323, 330, 340, 376 and 2, pp. 103, 147, 201; Funes de Villalpando, 2013, pp. 244, 923; Dobner, 2015, pp. 94-96, 146-147, 151, 157, 161-162, 165-166, 177; Leitsch, 2009, III.

<sup>23</sup> Pötting, *Diario*, I, pp. 336-337, 376-377 and 2, pp. 122, 147.

gestation. Although this pregnancy did not continue to full term, the midwife must have left a good impression in the house of Pötting. When pondering over who could be the most suitable attendant for a Spanish empress at the court of Vienna, Ana Sevillana turns out to be Pötting's first choice. She enjoyed an excellent reputation in Madrid, but personal experience might have confirmed the ambassador's decision to approach her first. His efforts, as mentioned above, were shattered by Ana's illness. It is noteworthy, nevertheless, that a midwife could climb in her professional career from an ambassadress' household to the chambers of an empress. Ana Sevillana's promotion to Vienna would not have been an isolated case. As we shall see later, when Leopold employed the very first midwife for his wife in September 1667, it also was through the mediation of the Spanish ambassador and his wife in Vienna<sup>24</sup>.

While the obstetrical landscape of the Spanish capital was screened for suitable candidates and their demands, a continuous flow of information went on between the Palace and the ambassador's residence. The Spanish queen took a keen interest in who was going to assist her daughter in birth. She expressed her opinion about possible candidates, exerted her authority and power of persuasion during the negotiation of working conditions; she was also willing to take over part of the expenses that had to be faced concerning the transfer to Vienna, board and lodging, the support for family members who were either travelling with the midwife or remaining in Madrid.

### 3. ANA D'AVALOS: A MIDWIFE ON TRIAL

When Leopold and Margarita expressed their urgent desire for a Spanish midwife in 1672 the young empress had already spent several years in Vienna and undergone at least six pregnancies we know of. We will therefore have to tackle the question of who had assisted her before the issue of recruiting a Spanish midwife appeared so strongly in Leopold's letters. How, we may ask, did her attachment to her former midwife end and what had been the reasons for this rupture? From Leopold's letters we can extract several possible reasons for this turn of events, all of which shed light on 17<sup>th</sup> century courtiers and their reasoning about health and diplomatic issues.

Margarita's first midwife, Ana d'Avalos, had an extraordinary entrée in Vienna. She was born in Naples, but of Spanish origin according to emperor Leopold<sup>25</sup>, but resided in Milan in the 1660s. When don Baltasar de la Cueva Enríquez

<sup>24</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 18 Sep. 1667, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil I, p. 320.

<sup>25</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 18 Sep. 1667, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 320; Leopold I to Pötting, 20 April 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil I, pp. 225, 227.

and Teresa Arias de Castellar, count and countess of Castellar, were on their way to Vienna, where the count was to take office as ambassador to the Spanish Crown, they spotted and contracted the midwife. The couple and doña Ana arrived at the imperial capital some weeks before Leopold's bride Margarita, that is on 25 October 1666<sup>26</sup>.

Ana d'Avalos's services were required for the ambassadress' impending confinement which occurred on the very day after the couple had arrived in Vienna; Leopold mentions this 'remarkable' timing and the fact that the ambassadress rejoiced after the birth of a son<sup>27</sup>. After having assisted the diplomat's spouse, the Spanish midwife was recommended to the newly-wed emperor<sup>28</sup>. Leopold depicts her as an excellent woman whose financial demands were not exaggerated. The emperor was so charmed by this first encounter that he even expressed his intention to keep the midwife in his service for good<sup>29</sup>. Soon doña Ana found the opportunity to live up to these great expectations. A boy was delivered on 28 September 1667. Leopold was overjoyed and full of praise for the attendant and it is worth noting that this praise is included in his first report to Pötting and occupies a considerable portion of the missive. The *comadre*, Leopold asserts, knew her profession *ex fundamento*. This was also confirmed by the dowager empress and by the most respectable ladies at court, who asserted that they had not seen a better one in their whole life. Leopold then relates the midwife's performance to her own career as a childbearing woman: Ana had given birth 17 times herself and had always done so without anybody else's help<sup>30</sup>.

The little prince died some four months later<sup>31</sup>. A healthy girl, Maria Antonia, was born in January 1669<sup>32</sup>, healthy enough to reach the age of 22 years and to add a candidate to the struggle for the Spanish succession. During the remaining years of her service Ana was to attend her mistress at two miscarriages<sup>33</sup> and two more births<sup>34</sup>. In 1670 she administered emergency baptism to a prematurely born boy.

<sup>26</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 28 Oct. 1666, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil I, p. 259; Labrador Arroyo, 2008, pp. 1223; Smíšek, 2011, pp. 918-919.

<sup>27</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 28 Oct. 1666, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil I, p. 259.

<sup>28</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 20 April 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 225, 227.

<sup>29</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 18 Sep. 1667, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil I, p. 320.

<sup>30</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 28 Sep. 1667, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil I, p. 323.

<sup>31</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 15 Jan. 1668, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil I, p. 347.

<sup>32</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 18 Jan. 1669, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Pötting, *Diario*, 2, p. 147; Widorn, 1959, p. 172.

<sup>34</sup> Smidt-Dörrenberg, 1966, pp. 73-74.

On 9 February 1672 a girl was born, who died 14 days later<sup>35</sup>. By 20 April of the same year Ana d'Avalos had left Vienna, officially of her own free will, but really giving in to the pressures of the emperor and hostile factions at court and on the streets<sup>36</sup>.

During the weeks which proceeded her departure, a wave of criticisms, accusations and hostility had been building up at court. Leopold's letters echo the debate and its arguments. They amount to this:

The midwife had acted carelessly after delivery, therefore she had to bear part of the responsibility for the infant's death.

The midwife's personal life was scandalous.

The midwife was engaged in secret letter-writing with Austria's potential enemies.

Leopold deals with the matter in several letters, and while he does so over the course of several weeks, his own position changes considerably. He turns from a defender into a witness for the prosecution. When he first reports the death of his little daughter, Maria Apollonia, to Madrid, he mentions strange voices at court who blamed the midwife for lack of care in the treatment of the infant. While referring the true causes of the baby's death (an abscess which had become gangrenous and eventually proved lethal) he admits that it was impossible to silence malicious rumours<sup>37</sup>.

On 9 May 1672, however, he seems to have changed sides, now supporting the midwife's critics. Considerable blame, he asserts, fell on her<sup>38</sup>. In a letter dated on 20 April 1672 he finally gives a full account of Ana's rise and fall.

Ana, he records, had entered the empress's service on the recommendation of the Spanish ambassador in Vienna. The Spanish faction at court had been pleased with her performance. German women, however, considered that she treated infants quite badly, when it came to acts like binding the navel.

Margarita's personal physician, José de Villarroel, now also supported the ones who were dissatisfied with the midwife's performance. Thus, after the recent death of the princess, doctors had attributed the cause *unanimiter* to her lack of care and to her ignorance. Before that happened, strange talk had circulated concerning her alleged correspondence with the French ambassador and asserting that she had received money from him.

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<sup>35</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 25 Feb. 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 216-217.

<sup>36</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 20 April 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 227.

<sup>37</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 25 Feb. 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 216.

<sup>38</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 9 May 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 1, p. 232.

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In addition, she was said to live in quasi-public adultery, an affirmation which Leopold does not credit however<sup>39</sup>. Nevertheless, the mob had expressed such hatred against the lady, that she almost ended up being stoned. So he had resolved to send the midwife home, a decision to which his spouse, Margarita, subscribed. To save Ana's reputation they agreed to pretend that the midwife herself had asked to leave.

Leopold adds a postscript in which he mentions the way the leader of the Spanish faction had reacted to the midwife's dismissal. Countess Teresa de Eril, the emperor writes, was very upset about this resolution, because she had very much promoted the midwife's interests at court<sup>40</sup>.

Pötting would later report back from Madrid: Countess Eril had bitterly complained to the Spanish queen Mariana that she had not been consulted on the matter. However, she nonetheless admits that countess Eril strongly complains about the ousting of Ana and about the fact that she had not been informed about the matter. Nevertheless, as Pötting states, she thanked God that it had not been her but the Spanish ambassador Castellar's spouse who had recommended the professional in question in the first place<sup>41</sup>.

### 4. PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS

If Leopold's account is accurate, we can imagine the court of Vienna teeming with obstetrical talk. Birth and complications ensuing from birth were a prominent topic in court communication. We can also assume that the quantity of letters, and the level of debates and gossip increased considerably when misfortune struck. So we can imagine dozens of muffled voices in the chambers, corridors, nurseries, confessionals commenting on details of the occurrence, passing on rumours and evidence, evoking similar cases, assessing causes, intentions and possible ulterior motives<sup>42</sup>.

Depending on their position, different courtiers were more or less inclined either to accuse or defend the Italian midwife of Spanish origins. Different criteria and obligations imposed by loyalty guided their judgement: patronage, cultural

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<sup>39</sup> For the hostility a Viennese landlord expressed against the Spanish midwife see Maurer, 2013, p. 269.

<sup>40</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 20 April 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 228.

<sup>41</sup> Pötting to Leopold I, 25 May 1672, GK 38-3, fol. 1070-1072.

<sup>42</sup> The Swedish ambassador Esais Pufendorf, for example, states in his diary, as does Leopold in a letter to Pötting, dated 25 February, that a post-mortem examination of the baby's body revealed an abscess at the navel which had become gangrenous and eventually proved lethal. Moreover, the midwife had injured the child's tongue so badly, that it would never be able to speak. The birth assistant must have realised that she had acted carelessly, he writes, given that soon after she expressed her relief that the baby was a princess (girl) and not a prince (boy). Esais Pufendorf, *Diarium Westfaliae et Viennensis*, 1670-1674, Vienna, Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Handschriften W 324, 15 February 1672, fol. 217r-217v.

affinity, maybe professional competition. Members of Margarita's Spanish household took Ana d'Avalos's side, doctors and German aristocrats who advocated different methods of childcare spoke against her. In this, cultural differences and even regional styles or fashions may have come into play.

Additionally, there were a considerable number of Austrian courtiers who would have grasped any opportunity to slander Margarita's Spanish entourage. There is considerable evidence of their low popularity, and when Margarita died in 1673, Leopold could not wait to be rid of them—an endeavour that was however jeopardized by the fact that the Spaniards who had arrived in autumn 1666 had contracted high debts during their stay<sup>43</sup>.

A Spanish midwife was governed and protected by the leading ladies of the Spanish faction in Vienna. These ladies maintained regular correspondence with the court of Madrid. Thus, everything that occurred in Vienna provoked comments and had resonances in Madrid. When a Spanish midwife was ousted without previous consultation this was seen as an offence against the Spanish crown at large.

We cannot assess the elements of truth in Leopold's testimony and the accusations against his court midwife. Interestingly, he says very little about his wife's opinion. It seems quite possible, however, that Ana d'Avalos in 1672 stood no chance of continuing in the empress's service. There could be a simple reason for this: her name had become associated with too many sad memories. And as the saying goes, *qui veit noyer son chien, l'accuse de la rage*.

Only one child had survived the ceaseless succession of pregnancies, miscarriages, premature births or deaths which occurred a short time after birth. Now, there is little doubt that the capacity of producing healthy issue had declined in the Casa de Austria in the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Bodies of prospective mothers and of infants had become more and more delicate and vulnerable, prone to contracting infections and diseases. Even if we take into account high mortality among babies in early modern Europe, the difficulty in bearing living children faced by the wives of Philipp II and Leopold I are nevertheless outstanding and exceptional. This is especially true for Mariana de Austria and her daughter Margarita. Most probably this was due to generations of nieces marrying their uncles and cousins marrying cousins. Therefore, a midwife had an almost impossible task to produce healthy offspring given that the essential physiological conditions for healthy offspring were absent.

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<sup>43</sup> Widorn, 1959, pp. 180-181.

## MIDWIFE DIPLOMACY

What added drama and anxiety to Margarita's and Leopold's situation was the general situation of the House of Habsburg in the 1650s and 1660s. Its mortality rate in that period far exceeded the birth rate. Leopold Wilhelm and Karl Ferdinand of Tyrol died in 1662, Karl Josef of Tyrol in 1664, and Sigmund Franz, last offspring of the Tyrolean line, in 1665. In the same year, the Spanish king Philip IV died, leaving a four-year-old son and Leopold as the only adult male member of the house, a situation which had not changed when his second wife and cousin Claudia Felicitas died in April 1676.

We have not commented so far on the strange accusation concerning the midwife's uncomfortably close relationship with the French envoy, Jacques Bretel de Grémonville, that is, with a diplomat who had to be tolerated in Vienna but who, by all accounts, was neither loved nor trusted, and who was constantly suspected of promoting the interests of the kingdom of France to the detriment of Spain and Austria. Unfortunately, we have not found any further evidence which could provide us with insight into the liaison between the midwife and the diplomat—that is, if any relationship even existed and if the whole accusation were not simply a fabrication originated, as Leopold himself seemed to believe, intended to undermine the reputations of both the midwife and the French nobleman.

Whether true or untrue, the charge adds to our understanding of a midwife's position at court. She was deemed capable of providing important knowledge. This knowledge most certainly was related to procreation. France held a stake in the succession of the Spanish crown; children born to the Spanish-Austrian empress were bound to be married to their Spanish kin. A midwife's knowledge was esteemed as much as that of doctors, and probably considered of more value with respect to pregnancy and birth. Propriety kept doctors at distance, while midwives were allowed to use the findings of their hands in order to assess the fitness of a body to procreate, to recognize the first signs of pregnancy or to evaluate the probable course and outcome of a pregnancy as well as the fitness of a new-born baby.

By 1672, the empress, who arrived in Vienna at the age of fifteen had undergone six pregnancies; she had miscarried twice and born one child prematurely. Doubts and rumours as to her body's capacity to bear healthy children had started immediately after her arrival in Vienna, and strategies for how to cope with her eventual death were discussed<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> Smíšek, 2011, pp. 918-919.

Let us suppose that Grémonville effectively targeted her midwife around the date of Mariana Apollonia's birth and death, offering money, favours or protection. What questions could he possibly have asked? It is quite probable that it would have been questions such as: What marks have previous births left on the empress's body? Would she still be capable of carrying a child, or of carrying a child to full term? Grémonville knew, that the midwife's assessment of these issues could be of enormous importance for France's military and diplomatic strategies and planning. We should bear this in mind when we turn to the next part of our discussion.

#### 5. LUCÍA PANESI. NO AUSTRIAN MIDWIFE WANTED. THE MIDWIFE IN THE STRUGGLE OF COURT FACTIONS

Why did Leopold assign such importance to the employment of a Spanish midwife? Why did it have to be an Ana Sevillana or a Lucía Panesi? Why did he not have recourse to a midwife who lived in or close to Vienna?

Leopold gives several reasons. First he states briefly, that Margarita had not made much headway in her knowledge of German<sup>45</sup>. Hereafter the emperor engages in the explanation of his 'true' reasons, which could only be revealed to confidants: there were people at court who tried to pour poison into Margarita's ear and to breed discord at court. How did they proceed? They tried to make the empress believe that some would prefer to be ruled by Leopold's second cousin, Archduchess Claudia Felicitas of Austria-Tyrol. Now, Leopold goes on in his letter, if he insisted on the hiring of a German midwife and misfortune struck at childbirth or shortly after, a possibility always to be taken into account, all the blame would be heaped on the German nation<sup>46</sup>. This, Leopold says, was the true reason<sup>47</sup> for the speedy employment of a Spanish midwife.

Claudia Felicitas (1653-1676) and her younger sister were the last members of the Tyrolean branch of the Casa de Austria. After the death of their brothers, their mighty (second) cousin Leopold at Vienna had brought the Tyrol under his direct influence and certainly had a say in the choice of his cousin's possible suitors.

Malign rumours had started immediately after Margarita's arrival in Vienna. Her frail beauty was admired but courtiers gossiped that she would not be able

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<sup>45</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 20 April 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 227. For languages at the court of Vienna and the conflicts arising out of different competences and expectations see Smíšek, 2011, pp. 938-940; Smidt-Dörrenberg, 1966, p. 38.

<sup>46</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 20 April 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 228; Widorn, 1959, pp. 176-177.

<sup>47</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 20 April 1672, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil 2, p. 227.

to bear children and that the emperor would have been better advised to marry Claudia Felicitas in the first place. In any event, it was added, the emperor would not allow his cousin to marry before his own wife had borne a child. Such gossip was passed on to Madrid in 1667 by the Spanish ambassador, count Castellar, and from there bounced back to Austria and came to the knowledge of the personalities concerned; empress Margarita was among them. The affair caused some trouble in her married life and subsequently Leopold vented his wrath against the Spanish ambassador, whom he identified as the author of the rumour, in his letters to Pötting. From that moment on, he was quite ill disposed to Castellar who returned to Spain in 1670<sup>48</sup>.

Childbirth involved intimate contact and communication which started at early stages of pregnancy and ended some two weeks after birth. A midwife had to encourage, to soothe, to console, to tell stories, to inspire hope and optimism. Attention focused solely on the body as cold care in modern clinics provides, would have been unconceivable in baroque Spain and baroque Vienna.

A midwife did not stand alone at court. She was associated with specific groups and factions. For all the cosmopolitanism of a baroque court, these factions also formed along the fault lines of origins and language. We have noted above that a midwife came under heavy attack because of an alleged '*descuido*' ('carelessness') in the treatment of a new-born child. These charges contrast with Leopold's praise for the midwife, expressed the day after his first son was born in 1667. Things could always go wrong in childbirth, writes Leopold to Pötting, delivery was never a routine procedure, it was always evaluated and complications at childbirth were not solely attributed to God's undecipherable design. Questions of guilt and blame were raised and the midwife was the first who had to respond. As the midwife was seen as acting on behalf of those who recommended or protected her, responsibility rubbed off on these people too. It would be interesting to know whether there were people at court promoting their Austrian candidates while Leopold was looking out for a Spanish solution.

As Margarita was never going to give birth again after 1672, the occasion for putting Leopold's assumptions to the test never occurred. Let us assume that his fears were accurate, that the Spanish faction would have grasped the opportunity of blaming a German midwife for a mishap during delivery or after the birth. What would have been their charges? Just negligence, lack of professional skill, ignorance? Or would they have gone further, suspecting the midwife of acting *mala fide*, of deliberately bringing misfortune upon the Casa de Austria, instigated by the dynasty's enemies.

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<sup>48</sup> Leopold I to Pötting, 24 Nov. 1667, in Leopold I, *Privatbriefe*, Teil I, p. 334-35; Widorn, 1959, pp. 160-161; Smíšek, 2011, pp. 918-919.

Birth is a moment of vulnerability and exposure, both for the mother and the infant. They depend on assistance and care. While it takes force and cunning to damage an adult, or even a child that has passed the threshold of reason, inconspicuous gestures suffice to undermine an infant's health or to further weaken the mothers physical condition.

There was no lack of strange rumours in Vienna. The Swedish ambassador Esaias Pufendorf communicates serious intrigues at Margarita's and Leopold's court: the empress's constable (*camarera mayor*), countess Eril, was much hated by the local people, he states, because she had completely isolated the empress and allowed the Germans hardly any access to her. He forwards the most peculiar accusations with regard to the care of the empress's babies. Countess Eril had been responsible for the death of both the little prince and the princess, so that the only surviving girl, that is María Antonia, might be able to bring a richer dowry to her projected marriage with the Spanish king<sup>49</sup>. A bewildering form of chauvinism, indeed, if these rumours had any foundation!

Even though all this was nothing but malevolent slander, it points to some important aspects of court life: female members of an aristocratic household and entourage were closely involved in the pregnancies and births of their noble mistresses, they were deemed capable of intriguing and of bringing harm upon the mother and the new-born baby. Now, we know for sure that countess Eril personally protected the empress's first midwife, Ana d'Avalos, and that she bitterly complained about her dismissal. Thus, we can read doña Ana's dismissal against the background of the struggles going on at court. Childbirth and the shared knowledge about its risks and dangers offered an excellent opportunity for disseminating rumours and accusations. As those at court took for granted that competing European powers based their aspirations on the continuing lack of Austrian offspring, such accusations never could be taken lightly.

So this was, in a nutshell, and without too much simplification, the situation with which Leopold had to contend in 1672: first he had to sacrifice a Spanish-Italian midwife in order to silence those who accused her of having killed his daughter. Thereafter he had to hire a Spanish midwife in order to silence those who would have accused a German birth assistant of killing his wife.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Testimonies of 17<sup>th</sup> century court life often refer in detail to the midwife's attitude and performance when attending pregnant aristocrats or delivering aristocratic babies. It appears that all eyes at court were on her. Thereby, it was not

<sup>49</sup> Pufendorf, *Bericht*, 1862, pp. 60-61. See also Smidt-Dörrenberg, 1966, pp. 61-62.

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only her performance in the field of obstetrics which was under close scrutiny. Courtiers knew that her profession endowed her with privileged knowledge, that she could be targeted by foreign agents and that a midwife's careless lips might seriously damage the interests of a dynasty in the complicated games of thrones of the time.

Thus midwifery turned into a diplomatic issue affecting the highest sphere of aristocratic courts and with male key players in politics and diplomacy committing themselves to the choice of the best possible professional, thereby showing notable interest in aspects of pregnancy, birth and the postpartum period.

On the other hand, midwifery allowed the interference of aristocratic women in the affairs of the courts to which their daughters had been married. Midwifery provided an umbilical cord through which daughters who married princes of foreign courts remained attached to their homeland. Midwifery created and strengthened female networks<sup>50</sup>.

Ambassadors —and ambassadresses— demonstrated allegiance to their masters by committing themselves to the pursuit of birth attendants with excellent qualifications. By doing so, they became involved in the preparations of birth. This was certainly not only perceived as a helpful act, but as a gesture laden with enormous symbolic value. In addition, it was not unusual, that the same midwife assisted an ambadress as well as an empress or a queen, thus symbolically linking the issue of both births. Children of queens and of ambadresses thus turned into midwife-siblings, so to speak. Birth and the care of the woman throughout and after pregnancy became a medium through which family ties were maintained despite distant places of residence and through which alliances could be expressed and strengthened.

In a period when the fate of the Casa de Austria depended on the birth of princes and princesses<sup>51</sup>, midwifery became stuff out of which court intrigues were spun. Slander and accusations which referred to birth and postpartum care became sharp weapons in the struggles between rival court factions.

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<sup>50</sup> It would be worthwhile to gather more evidence with respect to this question and to systematically relate midwifery to broader political issues of the time. We would have to compare cases in which female aristocrats married off to foreign courts brought their own midwives to those where they adapted to the obstetrical uses of the households they became part of. See for the court of Poland at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Leitsch, 2009, i, p. 578-583, and Dobner, 2015, pp. 94-96, 146-147, 151, 157, 161-162, 165-166, 177; for Madrid and Vienna in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Novo Zaballo, 2015, p. 237; Aichinger, 2018b, p. 12, pp. 20-21, 24-29, 36-37; Salary list of the imperial court of empress Maria, April 1638, Vienna, Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Staaten Abteilung Spanien Varia 11-2-23, fol. 191v. For a general survey see Junceda Avello, 1991.

<sup>51</sup> Spielman, 1981, p. 56.

In the ever-growing field of studies that try to reassess the importance of women in pre-modern court-life<sup>52</sup>, birth and midwifery are now attracting the attention they deserve. We are beginning to grasp the political dimension of women's reproductive capacities and the wider implications of childbirth and procreation<sup>53</sup>. Women at court were not only important 'when they acted as men did'<sup>54</sup>. In a hereditary monarchy like the Austrian Empire, everything depended on the genuinely female issues of pregnancy and birth. Husbands, courtiers, ambassadors had no choice, they had to take an interest in menstrual cycles, in symptoms of pregnancy, in matters of premature deliveries, miscarriages, still-born babies or happy delivery.

We have so far proposed several factors which might explain a midwife's privileged status at court: the risks of birth, secrecy, and possibly the fear that they might take part in malicious schemes if they were not treated well. Their employment therefore had to be negotiated at the highest political level. They dealt with ambassadors and ambassadors, whose babies they delivered before being in touch with archduchesses, queens, infantas and empresses. They were part of international networks, receiving higher salaries than singers or painters with international careers<sup>55</sup>.

Studying Spanish baroque culture, we should not leave out a final consideration. Midwives had access to noble women's most intimate sphere, they were metonymically related to the glory and prestige of these bodies and to what they represented. Their hands touched parts of these bodies nobody else (with the exception of doctors or surgeons in cases of emergency) was ever allowed to touch.

Childbirth was permeated with religious meaning. At all stages, the profession of midwives was sanctified by biblical models and, above all, by Mary who — according to some legends of the time— had attended at the birth of saint John<sup>56</sup>. Female members of the Casa de Austria, endowed with a semi-divine status in

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<sup>52</sup> See for example Braun, Keller, Schnettger, 2016; Sánchez Hernández, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> See for example Keller, 2005; García García, Keller, Sommer-Mathis, 2019; Stollberg-Rilinger, 2017, pp. 291-316; Carlos Varona, 2018; Sánchez, 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Wang, 2008, pp. 137-171, 146.

<sup>55</sup> Smidt-Dörrenberg, 1966, p. 62.

<sup>56</sup> See Usunáriz, 2016, pp. 319-363.

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allegories, mythological drama<sup>57</sup> and quasi-hagiographic writing<sup>58</sup>, relished paintings, where they posed holding and taking care of the newly born Mary in the way a midwife would do<sup>59</sup>.

So, where, say, a coach or a dress or a palace had not just to be useful, but to express the power and glory of the Imperial House, the same was true for the midwife. She had to be decked out, after all she had received royal blood into the world.

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<sup>57</sup> For Margarita's wedding ceremony see Spielman, 1981, p. 54.

<sup>58</sup> See for example on Margarita's grandmother, Guzmán, *Vida y muerte de Doña Margarita de Austria*.

<sup>59</sup> See for example Aichinger, 2018a, pp. 43-55.

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