

SEXTUPLETS AND HIGHER MULTIPAROUS BIRTHS

A critical review of history and legend from Aristoteles to the 20th century

by

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Part I: Multiparity and sextuplets

Though conception and reproduction have been favorite topics of the biologists of all ages many of the simplest facts of generation are still lacking their proper explanation. They remained mysteries and stimulated wild speculations not only among the uneducated people but also among the physicians, naturalists and others engaged in the scrutiny of Nature.

The phenomenon of twinning and multiparity attracted the interest of many throughout the centuries. Two of the central problems in multiparity were *a*) the maximum number of fetuses which a single uterus is able to carry, and *b*) the minimum number of sexual intercourses absolutely necessary for a plural conception. One was a topic discussed chiefly by physiologists and physicians; the other was more suitable for the neighborhood's gossip which in former years used to condemn the unfortunate pluriparous mother as an adulterer.

It is a general rule of Nature that the smaller is the animal the larger is the number of offsprings delivered at one single birth. Grünhagen¹ mentions that the salmon lays 20,000 eggs, the frog only 2500 to 3800. The rat and mouse each has 4 to 10 offsprings from a single parturition; the sheep has normally one lamb or two at one birth. The cow, the orang, the horse are usually uniparous animals.

Man is also an uniparous being as a rule. By the number of ova contained in a single ovary one could suppose, however, that a woman would have a great capacity to populate the world, should she have a sufficiently long life to do so. Sappey² estimated that a 3-year old girl's ovary contained over 400,000 ova, i. e., both ovaries had 800,000 ova; if all the eggs could be fertilized a single woman would be sufficient to create 4 huge cities.

¹ In WAGNER'S, *Arch. Anat.*, 1878; quoted by HELLIN D., *Die Ursachen der Multiparität der uniparen Tiere*. Münch., 1895.

² SAPPEY, *Traité d'anatomie*, Par., 1876, p. 711.

The frequencies of the various forms of pluriparity are included in Hellin's rule³ which states that twinning occurs once in every 80 births, a birth of triplets in every 80², of quadruplets in every 80³, etc. The mathematical frequency of a sextuplet birth would be therefore 1 : 80⁶ or practically nil.

For certain physiological considerations the physiologists of antiquity stated that five is the maximum that a human uterus could carry. In the 5th chapter of the 7th book of the *History of Animals* of Aristoteles⁴ we may read that "five at birth are the most that have been produced".

This "Aristotelian" maximum of five fetuses in a uterus found also an artistic expression in certain antique sculptures which represent the branches of a tree on which there are small nests each containing exactly five naked babies. René Ménard,⁵ the archeologist believes that these sculptures were representations of the usual story that the parents in antiquity would tell their inquisitive children about their origin: the mother would invoke Juno, Goddess of marriage, then she would go to the woods to pick little brothers and sisters from the nests on the trees.

The pseudo-Aristotelian doctrine was the scientific belief of the majority up until the late Victorian era though there were more and more reports to contradict "Aristoteles". Lodovico Bonaciolo⁶ in his 16th century study on generation mentions many quintuplets from the history but he is silent on higher plural births.

The 19th century large statistics which sometimes comprehend tens of millions of births in various countries do not mention anything over quadruplet births,^{7 8 9} and the opinion of many obstetrical professors of the 19th century was that any plural birth over quintuplets is fiction.

The strength of birth-statistics was so great that some of the obstetricians frankly believed that the quintuplet pregnancy seemed to represent the limit of human pluriparity^{10 11}. Others were more specific, and denied the possibility of

³ See HELLIN'S work in footnote 1.

⁴ ARISTOTELES, *The History of Animals*; transl. by R. Crosswell. Lond., 1883, p. 186. – It should be remembered, however, that the 10th Book of the *History of Animals* is now considered an apocryphal writing of a certain 'Pseudo-Aristoteles'.

⁵ R. MÉNARD, *La famille dans l'antiquité*; quoted by WITKOWSKI, *Les accouchements dans les beaux-arts*, etc. Par., 1894, p. 108; reproduction also. – Witkowski remarks that the antiquity is silent about such stories which the archeologist supposes.

⁶ L. BONACIOLO (d. 1540): *De foetus formatione*. Leiden, 1640.

⁷ MACKENZIE R. H., *Statistics of multiple births*. Lancet, Lond., 1840-41, 1: 549-51. – It discusses the results of study of the Prussian statistics for 1826-1837 with 6,067,200 births. The maximum was quadruplets, 15 for the years, or 2 per a million births.

⁸ BERG, F. T., *Om flerfostriga barnsbörder*. Hygiea, Stockh., 1880, 42: 331-42. Mentions quadruplets only; includes figures for Sweden for 1776-1878.

⁹ FLERBÖRDER åren 1781-1940. *Statist. årsb. Sverige*, 1947, 34: 62.

¹⁰ APPIA L., *Des accouchements multiples*. J. méd., Brux., 1861, 32: 357; 451. "Bornons-nous à constater que jusqu'ici la viabilité d'enfants multiples n'a pas dépassé le chiffre cinq...".

¹¹ LEBEL C., *De la grossesse multiple*. Par., 1869, pp. 8-9, where he writes that the modern

a sextuplet birth.¹² Corradi¹³ was very earnestly searching the literature on case reports of sextuplets but was greatly discouraged when he could find only a case which later proved to be a fake. Neither the French Puech¹⁴ in 1874, nor the German WEINBERG¹⁵ in 1901 went beyond quintuplets in their discussion of multiparity in their respective countries.

The influence of the pseudo-classical tradition of the Number 5 and the lack of a truly authentic case within the short life-span of most men created such an atmosphere of incredulity that when in 1888 a case of sextuplet birth was observed in Italy its objective report by Vassalli was almost ridiculed and his integrity was called in question, partly because he dared to fight against the authority of Aristoteles. His chief opponent, Guzzoni degli Ancarani, collected a huge amount of historical and birth-statistical material to prove that Vassalli must have been mistaken.¹⁶

So much for general background on the disputed problem of the capacity of human uterus. In my present study I attempt at collecting the various specimens of sextuplet, septuplet, octuplet and higher births and tracing them to their original sources as much as possible. In each instance one is interested to know, *a*) the exact date of birth, *b*) the place where it occurred, *c*) the name of the mother or of the family, *d*) the peculiarities of birth, *e*) the method of reporting (tradition, written report, etc.), *f*) comments and remarks of contemporaries and of later critics, *g*) authenticity, *h*) bibliographical references.

It is my belief that this review now includes all multiple births with six or more offsprings which have been reported as far in the literature of the Western World at any time. This literature includes some newspaper stories, magazine articles as well as scientific descriptions in medical journals, books old and more recent, etc., many of them listed in the Index-Catalogue of the Surgeon-General's Library. I did not search any manuscript material. Some of the reports refer to observations in Japan, China, Africa, Brazil, America, but most of them concern

observers consider quintuplet pregnancy as "... représenter la limite des accouchements multiples...".

¹² SCHROEDER, *Lehrb. d. Geburtshülfe*, Bonn, 1872, p. 55.

¹³ A. CORRADI, *Dell'ostetricia in Italia*. Bologna, 1874, p. 160, where he writes: "... io ho potuto raccogliere parecchi esempi di parti di 3, di 4, e di 5 figliuoli; ma niuno di 6...".

¹⁴ A. PUECH, *Des accouchements multiples en France*. Ann. hyg., Par., 1874, 2. ser., 41: 197-239.

¹⁵ W. WEINBERG, *Beiträge zur Physiologie und Pathologie der Mehrlingsgeburten beim Menschen*, Arch. ges. Physiol., Bonn, 1901, 88: 346-430.

¹⁶ GUZZONI DEGLI ANCARANI A., *A proposito di una gravidanza seigemina*. Rass. sc. med., 1889, 4: 437; 569; 617, 1 pl. - On p. 449 he writes that the birth-statistics which he collected from many European sources and clinics did not reveal a single case of sextuplets though more than 70,000,000 deliveries were included in the statistics. - In a later article (*Contributo alla statistica del parto multiple*. Atti Soc. ital. ostet. (1899) 1900, 6: 249-253) he expanded the birth figure to 83 millions, but still refused to admit Vassalli's case as an authentic sextuplet birth. The frequency of quintuplets was given at 1 in 41, 684, 006 deliveries.

European countries. A few veterinary annotations are also included, but it was not my intention to search for multiple births in animals.

Collective reviews of pluriparity have been written by several persons either in the form of chapters in books on reproduction, or in medical journals. Paré's surgical work, in Chap. 3 of its Book 25, deals with "Women bringing many children at one birth".¹⁷ The *Prodigiorum ac ostentorum chronica* of Lycosthenes¹⁸ was one of Paré's sources. Johan Schenck's *Observationum medicarum libri vii*¹⁹ is a very exhaustive collection of many legendary births in the appropriate chapter. Aldrovandi's *Monstrorum historia*²⁰ contains much repetition.

Schurig's *Syllepsologia historico-medica*²¹ was some help. Bianchi has but a few cases to discuss.²² In the 19th century literature Witkowski's all works are of value on obstetrical and related matters.²³ Reference has been already made to the study of Guzzoni degli Ancarani.²⁴ Among the journal articles the most profitable are Foy's on *Plural Births*,²⁵ Baudouin's on sextuplets only,²⁶ Bastin's for its exhaustiveness and illustrations,²⁷ Shishido's for its special Japanese data.²⁸

Bell referred to seven or eight cases described by the previously mentioned authors.²⁹ Fabris also mentions the more common cases.³⁰ Cook's report on septuplets includes some criticism.³¹ Lint's study on multiple births is written with the pen of a medical historian for those who can read Dutch.³² Schlieben's report is very comprehensive, based upon accurate sources.³³ Newman made a

¹⁷ The Works. Lond. 1649, pp. 654-655; or the 1678, London edition, pp. 591-592.

¹⁸ I used the 1557 Basel edition.

¹⁹ The 1609 Frankfurt edition, pages 641 to 645 mainly.

²⁰ ALDROVANDI U., (1522-1605), *Monstrorum historia*. Bologna, 1642.

²¹ SCHURIG M., (physician in Dresden) *Syllepsologia historico-medica; hoc est, Conceptionis muliebri consideratio physico-medico-forensis... deinde Didymotokia, seu Gemellatio*. Dresden, 1731.

²² In his: *De naturali in humano corpore vitiosa morbosaque generatione historia*. Torino, 1741, pp. 247-249.

²³ I have consulted the following of his works: a) *Histoire des accouchements chez tous les peuples* (Par., 1887); b) *Anecdotes et curiosités historiques sur les accouchements* (Par., 1892); c) *Curiosités historiques sur les accouchements* (Par., 1892); d) *Les accouchements dans les beaux-arts*, etc. (Par., 1894).

²⁴ Cf. footnote 16.

²⁵ In: *Med. Press & Circ.*, Lond., 1890, n. ser., 50: 304-8.

²⁶ *La grossesse sextuplet*. *Gaz. méd. Paris*, 1904, 12. ser., 4: 157; 205; passim. Also German transl. *Frauenarzt*, 1905, 20: 151; passim.

²⁷ *Accouchements multiples, véridiques, légendaires et facétieux*. *Aesculape*, Par., 1929, 19: 282-98.

²⁸ In the: *Iji sinbun*, Tokyo, 1901, p. 859; 1897-1901.

²⁹ *Plural births with a new pedigree*. *Biometrika*, 1933, 20: 110-120.

³⁰ *Contributo allo studio della gravidanza multipla*. *Rass. ostet.*, 1933, 42: 179-213.

³¹ *Septuplets with different birthdays*. *J. Hered.*, 1934, 25: 193-7.

³² In the: *Ned. tschr.*, 1935, 79: 4648-54.

³³ *Mehrlingsgeburten in Sage und Geschichte*. *Zschr. ärztl. Fortbild.*, 1936, 33: 233; 263.

special study of sextuplets and "octuplets".³⁴ Andreassi's study is not of a collective nature.³⁵ Gedda's work on twinning refers to several high plural births and it called my attention to two little known cases.³⁶

There are of course many more journal articles which deal with individual instances of plural birth. These are to be mentioned together with the described birth. In searching the volumes of the Index-Catalogue I found many times titles of articles that referred to "multiple pregnancy" without a number of the offspring. Most of such reports discussed clinical observations on twin and triplet pregnancies.

I begin my review with a section on the most frequent type of the group to be discussed, i. e., with sextuplet births, and continue to add other sections until we come from the realm of the possible into the world of the legendary.

I. Sextuplet

The mathematical frequency of a sixfold delivery is 1 : 80⁵, or one such delivery in every 3,276,800,000 births according to Hellin's rule. Some of the authentic cases have been collected by Baudouin,³⁷ who, writing in 1904, mentioned 4 such events only. Lotze³⁸ in 1937 wrote: "... only 5 such cases are described in the literature". Newman³⁹ in 1948 stated that he was able to gather 6 such cases of which only four could be considered authentic. I collected references to 20 human and 5 animal sextuplets.

a) *Human births*

1 *12th Century, A. D.* Abu'l-Qásim (az-Zaharáwi), of Cordova, who died 1106 or 1107 A. D., discussed in his *Kitáb at-tašrif* the number of fetuses which could develop in the uterus and be delivered at one abortion. He held that the number may be 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and even more than 10. "I hold it for certain — he wrote — that a woman has aborted seven and another has ejected fifteen fetuses all well formed. This is the work of Allah"⁴⁰.

³⁴ *Report of octuplets and sextuplets in the United States.* J. Hered., 1948, 39: 204-5.

³⁵ *Problemi e considerazioni sulla gravidanza multipla.* Medicus, Vatican City, 3: 41-61.

³⁶ GEDDA L., *Studio dei gemelli.* Roma, 1951, pp. 160-161. Prof. Gedda has also supplied me with the photographs of the newspaper reports on the two cases of plural births, and with a French translation of the Italian text.

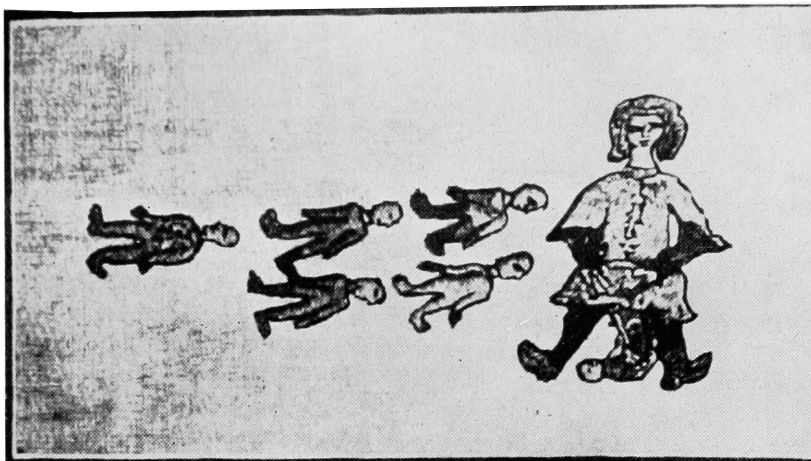
³⁷ See footnote 26.

³⁸ LOTZE R., *Zwillinge.* Oehringen, 1937, p. 76.

³⁹ See footnote 34.

⁴⁰ ABU'L-QASIM, *La chirurgie*; transl. by L. Leclerc. Par., 1861, p. 179, in Chap. 75 of Book 2; "Du nombre des foetus qui peuvent se former dans la matrice et en être expulsés par avortement. Il peut se former dans la matrice un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq, six, sept et même plus de dix foetus. Je tiens pour certain qu'une femme a avorté de sept et une autre de quinze, tous formés. Cela est l'œuvre de Dieu...". — The translation of Leclerc was made according to the Arabic text of a MS. in the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris.

The work of this Arab physician was translated into Latin by Gerard of Cremona before 1187 A. D., and widely quoted and misquoted by the posterity. I begin my list of sextuplets with this reference since it specifically mentions also that six fetuses can be formed in a single uterus and aborted. It seems to be likely that his statement was not based upon personal observation, however.



Case No. 2: Jewess with sextuplets; miniature from a medieval manuscript (Passah Haggada) (after Bastin; repr. from *Aesculape*, 1929, 19: 236).

2 13th Century, A. D. Passah Haggada, a Hebrew manuscript of the 13th century, contains a miniature showing a Jewess who is giving birth to sextuplets. The miniature was described by KOHUT⁴¹ in his *Geschichte der deutschen Juden*, and reproduced by Bastin.⁴²

3 15th Century. Barbara Stratzmann (née Schmottzerin), wife of Adam Stratzmann, has been an exceptionally fertile woman. Among her 53 children she also had five sets of twins, four sets of triplets, one set of sextuplets and one set of septuplets. The couple lived in the village of Benningheim in Württemberg. The birth of the sextuplets was her 28th parturition, the previous deliveries being partly with one child, partly with twins and triplets. In the sextuplet set three of the children were aborted in the 5th month of pregnancy; one came nine days later; another was delivered eleven weeks later; and the sixth was issued 10 weeks later (7 weeks is given by a later report of Bianchi).

There were 38 males and 15 females among the children of this fertile Württemberg couple, but only 34 of them were baptized (i. e., they were born alive),

⁴¹ KOHUT, *Geschichte der deutschen Juden*.

⁴² In *Aesculape*, Par., 1929, 19: p. 286.

and only 4 of them reached their ninth birthday. Nevertheless, a 1569 woodcut leaf, which is the earliest printed report of the event to my knowledge, represents all 53 children as if all of them were alive and grown up.⁴³ Among the contemporary documents are mentioned two paintings made for the honor of the Stratzmann couple, one for the City Hall (this is now in the Germanic Museum at Nürnberg; is it still in existence?) and one for the church of Benningheim.



Case No. 3: Sixteenth century woodcut (Nürnberg, 1569) showing the Stratzmann family of Benningheim, Württemberg (Repr. from *Zschr. ärztl. Fortbild.*, 1936, 33: 236; after Schlieben).

This event was later described in the *Württembergische kleine Chronik* by Schmelin,⁴⁴ who was the source for the report of Schlieben.⁴⁵ Bianchi in 1741 described the sextuplets, without naming the mother and referring to her as a 15th century woman of Württemberg, and took the story as an authentic case “confirmed by the best testimonies and by public monuments”.⁴⁶

⁴³ The leaf is headed: “Wunderbarliche zeytung von einem Weibsbild so in jrer Ehe mit jrem Hauswirth erzeugt und geboren hat drey und fünffzig Kinder”. It was printed in Nürnberg, 1569, by Görg Lang, woodcutter. The picture’s background is a hilly country and a valley with the village of Benningheim. In the foreground there is a huge crucifix encircled by a V-shaped row of kneeling figures, the father with the sons on the left, the mother and the daughters on the right. Below the woodcut there is the legend in 8 short columns, each of 11 lines. – The picture is reproduced on p. 235 of Schlieben’s article. Cf. footnote 45.

⁴⁴ SCHMELIN, *Württembergische kleine Chronik*. 1660.

⁴⁵ SCHLIEBEN, *Mehrlingsgeburten*. *Zschr. ärztl. Fortbild.*, 1936, 33: p. 236.

⁴⁶ G. BIANCHI, *De naturali in humano corpore*, etc. Torino, 1741, p. 247: “... testimoniis certissimis publicisque monumentis firmata”. – He refers to Helwig, Welsch, Eisenmenger,

4 *15th Century*. Savonarola⁴⁷ refers to the work *Conciliator* in which Pietro di Abano allegedly wrote that in his own village of Abano a woman gave birth to six embryos at once all of which moved. The original references were not at my disposal. The date of the event should be placed in the 13th or 14th century when Pietro di Abano (1250-1315) was living. The reference from Savonarola is in SCHENCK'S collection.⁴⁸

5 *16th Century*. Lady Maldemeure has been a very fertile woman. Her story is related by Ambroise Paré as a contemporary happening. The noble family had its house in the parish of Sceaux, between Sarte and Main, near Chambellay. The lady brought forth twins the first year she was married; the second year she had triplets, the third year she had quadruplets, the fourth year she gave birth to quintuplets, and the fifth year she was blessed with sextuplets. Paré says that the Lord Maldemeure of his times was the only surviving member of the sextuplets.⁴⁹

The Maldemeure case was widely reported by later writers with reference to Paré, but the 19th century obstetrician, F. M. Ramsbotham, JR, remarked that there was no doubt in his mind that Paré believed what he had written down, "it would be going too far, perhaps, to say that such an event was impossible: but we must take into account that Paré, though an honest man, and excellent surgeon for his time, was a very credulous philosopher".⁵⁰ To which we should add that Ramsbotham himself lived in the century when most obstetricians were prejudiced in the matter of plural births.

6 1705, A. D. The wife of Moemon Hiroshimaya, a farmer in the town of Marugame, of Sanuki Province, on the island of Shikoku, in Japan, gave birth to sextuplets. There are several reports of this birth, some of them refer to it as septuplet pregnancy.

In a book series called *Sioziri* which was edited by Nobukage Amano⁵¹ the famous sextuplet case of Japan is reported in the following way. In the year of 1705 the farmer was 39 years old and his wife was 33 years of age. The children were born at successive days: a) at 7 A. M., February 23, a girl was born; b) at 4 P. M., Febr. 24, a boy; c) at 8 A. M., Febr. 26, a girl; d) at 8 A. M., Febr. 27, a child whose sex was later identified as male; e) at 9 A. M., Febr. 27, 2 boys or one (the account is not quite clear at this point). The birth of the placentae is given

Schroeck, and others who have also accepted the authenticity of the case. He puts the number of stillbirths at 8 only, and states that all the other children were baptized.

⁴⁷ SAVONAROLA, Tract. 6. Cap. 21, Rubr. 25; quoted by Schenck.

⁴⁸ SCHENCK J., *Observationum*, & c. Frankf., 1609, p. 644.

⁴⁹ PARÉ A., *The works*. Lond., 1678, p. 591. This is part of Chapt. 3, Book 25.

⁵⁰ RAMSBOTHAM F. M. JR., *The principles and practice of obstetric medicine and surgery*. 2. ed. Lond., 1844, p. 497, in his footnote.

⁵¹ This account as well as the following one was also published in Tokusima sinpó (Tokusima News), No. 2,090, 18 June, 1896, from where SISIDO took them for his own article which I have seen in Iji sinbun, Tokyo, 1901, p. 860.

as follows: *a*) two placentae were born at 9 P. M., Febr. 24, *b*) two others came later, and *c*) one was born still later. The mother died on March 4.

The same birth is told by Mitumune ISII in the book *Syusin Dan* in the following way: *a*) *b*) *c*) as above; *d*) at 9 P. M., Febr. 26, a boy; *e*) at 8 A. M., Febr. 27, two boys, and *f*) at 9 P. M., Febr. 27 another child (sex not stated; account not very clear at this point). This account puts the mother's age at 39 years as her husband's, and questions whether the births could have been spread over a 5-day period. (See footnote 51).

A third version of the Japanese sextuplets is given by Zensetu Kawati⁵² in which the births are slightly different: *a*) 23 Febr., a girl; *b*) 24 Febr., a boy; *c*) 26 Febr., girl, and boy; *d*) 27 Febr., 2 boys. All reports state that two (ISII says 3) remained alive, one girl and one boy. This case has not been quoted by the western literature, at least not to my knowledge.

7 ca 1792, *A. D.* This is an alleged observation of Osborn, London professor of obstetrics. The date is the publication date of his *Essays on the Practice of Midwifery* (Lond., 1792). His original work, however, does not describe the observation which concerns a sextuplet abortion. It was first reported some years later by the *London Practice of Midwifery* which is a copy of John Clarke's lectures and some other works on obstetrics. This obstetrical textbook asserted that Osborn met with 6 distinct fetuses thrown off at one abortion.

The case seems to have no authenticity, however. It is not contained in Osborn's own writings, and Ramsbotham⁵³ doubted its authority on the ground that his own father, who was a pupil of Osborn and on terms of friendship with him, had no recollection of ever having heard Osborn to mention such a circumstance in his lectures.

8 1798. The birth of a sextuplet through the period of four days of labor occurred in the village of Werchocq, near Boulogne-sur-Mer. The mother was the 36-year old Marguerite Fournier who for eight years has been the wife of citizen Pierre Duisant, a workman. She had 4 previous deliveries, 3 boys and one girl, all alive. Her fifth pregnancy began in May or June 1797; her legs became swollen in the third month, and she had an unusually large abdomen.

The labor pains began at 7 P. M., 12 Febr., 1798. A trained midwife was present who noted the progress of the birth. At 4 A. M., 13 Febr., the membranes ruptured, and at 10 A. M. a girl was born who lived for 24 hours. At 10 A. M., 14 Febr., a second fetus presented itself, and it was born at 7 A. M., the next day, a boy who lived 2 hours. Soon the third fetus, a boy was born who lived only one hour. When the midwife wanted to remove the secundinae she felt some difficulty.

⁵² KAWATI Z., *Nippon huzin ika siryo* (Historical material on female medicine in Japan) Tyugai izi sinpó, No. 517; quoted in Sisido's article; cf. footnote 51.

⁵³ RAMSBOTHAM F. M., *The principles and practice of obstetric medicine and surgery*. 2. ed., Lond., 1844, p. 497, and its footnote. — Also included in Foy's article; see footnote 25.

Then, three more children, 2 boys and 1 girl, were delivered, all stillbirths, and all having the size of 5-6-month old embryos. The mother remained alive.

An official report was prepared by Dr. med. F. Courtin dated '11 thermidor' of the 6th year (: 29 July, 1798). It was mailed to the Société d'agriculture of Boulogne-sur-Mer, which again reported it to the Société philomathique of Paris on 6 August, 1798. The receipt of the report was acknowledged by the latter scientific body on 20 August, 1798. The original communication of the doctor, together with the archives of the society, are now in the library of Paris University (Proc. verb., First package, fol. 77).

The case of this French sextuplet was found and described by my colleague, Dr Ernest Wickersheimer in 1909.⁵⁴ His paper was translated by La Torre⁵⁵ into Italian.

9 1805. The Döpfer hoax began with a letter which was written to the Editor of the Medicinisch-chirurgische Zeitung from the town of Ohlau, in Silesia. Mrs Döpfer, wife of the town's chimneysweeper was supposed to have delivered on 10 December, 1805, six stillborn boys. The letter was dated 11 Dec., 1805, and was printed early next year in the medical magazine. The fertility of the woman was illustrated with the statement that she had 44 children all together, 27 boys and 3 girls from her first marriage, and from the second, which she began only 3 years before, she conceived three times, with the first pregnancy of triplets, the second gestation with quintuplets, and the third one the reported sextuplets.

The 1806 volume of the medical journal⁵⁶ came into the hand of Osiander senior⁵⁷ who accepted the case as authentic example of sextuplet birth. So did Kilian in 1847.⁵⁸ But already in 1829 Osiander junior⁵⁹ heard that Mrs Döpfer had been cheating; she collected her various abortive fetuses, put them in alcohol, and lied that she gave birth to six at once.⁶⁰ And though Vortisch⁶¹ in

⁵⁴ WICKERSHEIMER E., *Une observation inédite de grossesse sextuple*. Bull. Soc. obst. Paris, 1909, 12: 320-21.

⁵⁵ LA TORRE, In *Clin. ostet.*, 1910, 12: 151-3.

⁵⁶ *Med. chir. Zeitung*, 1806, v. 1: p. 127.

⁵⁷ OSIANDER F. B., *Handbuch der Entbindungskunst*. 1. Aufl., p. 319 of v. 1. - See footnote 59 below.

⁵⁸ KILIAN H., *Die Geburtslehre*, Frankf. a. M., 1847, p. 165.

⁵⁹ OSIANDER J. F. (ed.) *Osiander's Handb. d. Entbindungskunst*. 2. Aufl., Tübingen, 1829, v. 1: p. 298-299 (footnote): "Der in der ersten Ausgabe dieses Handbuchs S. 319 erwähnte Fall von Sechslingen aus Ohlau in Schlesien, verhält sich, wie ich höre, ganz anders, als ihn öffentliche Blätter aussprengten. Um zu betrügen, sammelte jenes Weib ihre abortiven Fötus, und gab dann vor, sechs derselben auf einmal geboren zu haben".

⁶⁰ SCHROEDER., *Lehrb. d. Geburtshülfe*. Bonn, 1872, p. 55. - After discussing the deception the author states definitely that there are no cases of sextuplets.

⁶¹ VORTISCH H., *Afrikanische Sechslinge*. Münch. med. Wschr., 1903, 50: 1639-40. - He refers to the Ohlau 'sextuplets' with the words: "Die Geschichte der Sechslinge jener Frau in Sachsen (sic!) die im Laufe der Zeit ihre Föten in Spiritusgläsern sammelte und sie als das Ergebnis einer Geburt ausgab, verleitet von der Auri sacra fames, dürfte den Herren Kollegen bekannt sein. Soviel ich weiss, ist kein weiterer Fall einer 6fachen Geburt in der Literatur beschrieben...". His last statement is inaccurate.

1903 excluded the Ohlau case of sextuplets from the series of authentic observations, a misinterpretation of his German article by Baudouin⁶² revived Mrs Döpfer's deception and dressed it with some new authenticity. There was no sextuplet in Ohlau.

10 1810. A general statement of the same Osiander senior would let us believe that the year was so fertile that in France alone there were reported 25 women who gave birth to quadruplets, quintuplets and *sextuplets*. Osiander (father) held the view⁶³ that certain cosmic events may be responsible for climatic and secular changes in the frequency of multiple births. Whether he had any statistical data at his disposal at the time when he commented on the year's fertility I was unable to determine⁶³.

11 1831. The wife of a man named Dernian Ploson, in the village of Drossin, in Bessarabia, gave birth to sextuplets on 30 December, 1831. The mother was not yet 20 years old. All six were daughters, slightly smaller than normal newborn babies. The children lived long enough to be baptized but all died on the evening of their birthday. The mother remained alive.

The case was reported by Dr Warren, of Boston⁶⁴ and was included among them collected by Foy.⁶⁵ The original sources are not established.

12 1846. Mrs Marr, of Phippsburg, Maine, U. S. of America, was delivered of six children on the 27th of June according to a Bath newspaper. The news was reprinted under Medical Miscellany (Aug. 5, 1846) in the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal of 1847⁶⁶ with the added note that two of the babies were living, the rest were dead (stillborn?); the mother and twins were doing well.

This sextuplet event was in 1904 discovered by Baudouin⁶⁷ among the references of the Index-Catalogue and, though he could not verify the reference in the French libraries, he accepted it with some reservation and scolded the obstetrical professors of his time for their neglect of bibliography.

13 1866. The Bushnell sextuplets were born on September 8, 1866 in Chicago, to Mrs Winnie A. Bushnell, wife of J. L. Bushnell. There were three boys and three girls according to a certificate signed by the attending physician, Dr James Edwards, and the midwife-nurse, Priscilla Bancroft. The birth has been kept in secret. It was not reported by the contemporary newspapers, and the family did not brag about it. If there had been an official record of the birth at

⁶² BAUDOUIN, in *Gaz. méd. Paris*, 1904, 12. ser., 4: 157; 205.

⁶³ OSIANDER J. F., cf. my footnote 59. At the place quoted, p. 287 (footnote).

⁶⁴ WARREN, *Med. Press*, 1862, June 25. (quoted after Foy) I was unable to find the article.

⁶⁵ FOY, see footnote 25.

⁶⁶ In *Boston M. & S. J.*, 1847, 35: 27. — This is but a 3-4 line news note, without any additional authority. Someone some future time may take the trouble to check on the official birth records of this Maine town to verify the facts.

⁶⁷ See my footnote 26. — Baudouin writes: “... un fait américain, que tout le monde ignorait d'ailleurs et qui date pourtant de 1847. Ce qui prouve une fois de plus, que la bibliographie n'intéressait pas plus alors la majorité des professeurs d'accouchements...”.

Chicago, it perished at the time of the 1871 big fire which demolished a large portion of the town.

Thus, the surviving members of the Bushnell sextuplet could reach their old



Case No. 14: The Rezzonico sextuplets of Castagnola, Italy, described by Vassalli in 1888 (Repr. after a plate of Guzzoni degli Ancarani).

age before they were detected by American magazine writers and radio broadcasters in 1938. In the Oct. 25, 1938 issue of the LOOK magazine the remainder of the brothers and sisters told their strange story. There were also photographs, and reproductions of the doctor's signed certificate, the only documentary evi-

dence of some authority. The sextuplets were accepted by Newman as the only American case of this kind.⁶⁸

According to the statement of the survivors, brother Loberto and sister Amelia died at 8 months of age. Brother Norberto died at 68 in 1934. Alberto was living at Albion, N. Y., in 1938. One sister is Mrs Alinca Parker who lived at Silver Lake, N. Y. in 1938. Another sister is Mrs Alice Hughes who has a home at Flagstaff, Arizona. Alberto and Mrs Parker were detected by Mr Robert Ripley, the creator of the Believe It Or Not series, in 1938.

14 1888. The famous Italian sextuplets were born at Castagnola to the wife of the village mayor. The mother, Rachele Rezzonico, was a healthy peasant woman, 161 cm tall, 36 years old. The father, Giovanni Rezzonico, was a handsome man, 180 cm tall, 42 years of age.

The couple lived in Castagnola, a small village with 585 inhabitants, near Lugano, Switzerland. She had her last menstruation on 24 Dec., 1887, and it was calculated that her conception occurred about mid-January 1888. She had an early hyperemesis, and her girdle increased to such a size that when at the fourth month of pregnancy she looked as a mother near term. She felt active movement of the fetus(es). On 4 May, 1888, which was the 115th day of pregnancy she felt the rupture of the bag of waters while working on the fields.

A midwife was called who removed the first fetus which was in a breech presentation. Then, Dr Francesco Vassalli was called and the rest of the labor was under his supervision. Since there was indication for finishing the spontaneous abortion, he caused the uterine orifice to dilate, and perforated the second bag of waters, thereafter he extracted the 2nd fetus, also in breech presentation. Then, a third bag of waters was found, and the 3rd fetus delivered by extraction. The procedure was repeated with the 4th and the 5th fetuses. All this happened within two hours.⁶⁹

After the birth of the fifth fetus, hemorrhage started which indicated the artificial removal of the placenta. It was partially removed in fragments, and the resulting hemorrhage required urgent measures. Until further help of additional physicians arrived from the Ambulanza Medico-Chirurgica of the nearby Lugano, Dr Vassalli kept his fist within the womb for ca 4 hours as a tamponade. After the arrival of the Lugano ambulance, the placenta was fully removed together with the sixth fetus and its bag of waters.

All fetuses were alive at birth, but they died within a few hours. Their total weight was 1,730 grams. Their average length was betw. 22 and 26 cm. The largest weighed 305 g, and the smallest was 240 g. Four were boys and 2 girls.

⁶⁸ See footnote 34.

⁶⁹ The original description by Vassalli was published under the title: *Caso di gravidanza sesquigemellare*, in the *Gazz. med. ital. lombard.*, 1888, 48: 216-18. The author called it 'unico caso finora indiscutibile di gravidanza multipla sesquigemellare'. - A short note appeared on the birth in *Lancet*, 1888, 2: 787.

Though the doctor's original report talks of a single placenta with six different amniotic sacs, later comments speculated that it might have been a multiple placenta. Baudouin ⁷⁰ in 1904 came out with his hypothesis according to which Vassalli's case was the telescoping of three pregnancies (i. e., triovular) where one amniotic sac covered 2 ova, the second sac covered a triplet, and the 3rd sac contained one ovum.

An immediate criticism of Vassalli's observations was published by Guzzoni degli Ancarani, professor of obstetrics at Cagliari, ⁷¹ in 1889. Though he did not doubt the word of the country doctor he did not consider it a scientifically proved case because Vassalli was not able to produce the placenta.

Later on, after Vassalli's reply in 1894 at the Eleventh International Congress of Internal Medicine, ⁷² Guzzoni added to his doubts that it was impossible to believe that the doctor had kept his hand for four hours in the uterine cavity to check the bleeding. Moreover, none of the attending doctors was present at *all* six births. In his opinion, which was evidently tinged with professional jealousy, it was impossible to believe in having only one placenta with six amniotic sacs. ⁷³ In 1924 Cristalli wrote that even the old master of Vassalli, Prof. Cuzzi, was not willing to accept the observation against the opinion of 'Aristoteles' ⁷⁴. On the other hand, HERF (Fortsch. Med., Oct. 4, 1894) called it the first (?) well-authenticated case on record. La Torre, ⁷⁵ who in 1910 reprinted Vassalli's original 1888 paper and his 1894 revindication, believed that it was a true case of sextuplets. Other obstetricians have also accepted its authenticity.

From La Torre's paper it is known that the cadavers of the six fetuses are held at the Istituto ostetrico di S. Caterina in Milano; that there exists a certificate signed by the three helping colleagues, the doctors Solari, Reali and Bianchi; that the father also signed a declaration as a magistrate of the country.

Hence, it is one of the best authenticated cases of sextuplet birth which Vassalli described, though it would be an error to call it the first case of this kind.

15 1889. This is the year of the Japanese journal *Hakubun zasshi* which in its 20 Nov. issue reported two sets of sextuplets allegedly born in the United States. No such cases are known from American sources. ⁷⁶

⁷⁰ See footnote 26.

⁷¹ See his article in footnote 16. - Also the short note of minutes of the 18 May meeting of the Società medico-chirurgica di Pavia in the *Gazz. osped. Milano*, 1889, Oct. 13, p. 652.

⁷² VASSALLI F., *A rivendicazione del primo caso di gravidanza seigemellare*. Atti Congr. med. internat. (1894) 1895, 11. Congr., 5: p. 243; discussion p. 244. - The case was further discussed in foreign magazines: a) *Boll. med. Svizzera ital.*, 1894, No. 3 & 4.; b) *Fortsch. Med.*, 1894, Oct. 4; c) *Boston M. & S. J.*, 1895, 132: 243; in the 'Miscellany'.

⁷³ GUZZONI DEGLI ANCARANI, *A proposito del parto seigemellare descritto dal Dott. Vassalli*. Atti Soc. ital. ostet. (1894) 1895, 1: 301.

⁷⁴ CRISTALLI G., *L'accouchement multiple à Naples de 1914 à 1921*. *Rev. fr. gyn.*, 1924, 15: 161-83.

⁷⁵ LA TORRE F., *Gravidanza seigemellare*. *Clin. ostet.*, Roma, 1910, 12: 145-53.

⁷⁶ The article of this Japanese newspaper was reprinted in the paper of Y. HASIBA, *Issan tasi ni tuki* (On multiple births) *Tokyo zinruigakki zassi*, v. 8, No. 84, pp. 233-36.

According to the Japanese newspaper, there were two sets of sextuplets born in the U. S.: 1) one set occurred in the State of Idaho, with three boys and three girls whose total weight was 18 'kin' (equal to about 12 kilograms); all were supposed to be healthy and alive; 2) the other set saw light in the State of Nevada, 4 boys and 2 girls. The family's name was given in Japanese characters, and, by



Case No. 18: The West-African sextuplets in 1903, in Accra (Gold Coast); described by Kerr and Cookman (Repr. from *Med. Press & Circ.*, Lond., 1903, 75: 538).

respelling, it sounds like 'Chilect' or 'Hirect'. To give more authority to its report the newspaper added the names of the children: Frederick, Mill, Cleveland, Salmon, Victoria and Luise.

16 1896. Another Japanese newspaper, this time the *Tokusima sinpo* (*Tokusima News*), tells the story of another U. S. American couple who had sextuplets in the State of Indiana. This story is again unconfirmed by American sources.

The first report was published in No. 2,090, dated 18 June, 1896, of the mentioned daily paper. It was then reprinted by Sisido⁷⁷ on p. 859 of his article.

The wife of farmer Friar Hainschnitt (?) was 27 years old when she gave birth on 5 May 1896 to three girls and 3 boys. Previous to the sextuplets she had 3 other children.

17 1899. Four short lines in the 'Echoes and News' section of a medical magazine⁷⁸ of 16 Dec., 1899, read as follows: "It is reported that Mrs J. Karl, of

⁷⁷ See footnote 51.

⁷⁸ In *Medical News*, N. Y., 1899, v. 75: 804.

Mobile, Alabama, gave birth to six male children, 8 Dec., 1899. Mother and children are reported as doing well".

The existence of this sextuplet birth is not confirmed by other sources.

18 1903. On Sunday, 19 April, 1903, a native woman of the West-African town Accra (Gold Coast) was seen with six newborn children, 5 boys and one girl. The most authentic report of the Gold Coast sextuplets was written by the doctors J. W. Kerr and H. Cookman, both being medical officers of the West African Medical Staff at the time of the happy event.⁷⁹

Drs Kerr and Cookman were perhaps the first medical men to see the newborn children, but they did not witness the birth itself. They were summoned to see the Negress with her six babies. When they arrived the babies were laid out in a corner of the native hut, all six of them. At the request of the doctors the babies were taken to the light for examination and photography.

The doctors found four placentae: – one girl and one boy had a placenta each, while the other 4 boys were twinned to two placentas. According to the doctors' report, the woman was in labor for 4 hours, and the births followed in quick succession. But the children did not stay long alive. One died on 21 April; four died on 22 April; and the last died on 23 April. Since the doctors arrived on the day of the birth they have observed all six infants alive, and photographed them. (They also were from Accra).

The mother told that she had several previous pregnancies, each from a different father. In the first pregnancy she gave birth to 4 children, in the 2nd and 3rd she had triplets. The report of these medical officers was dated 21 May, 1903.

The same event was also reported second-hand by a physician who worked at the Basel Mission at Alburia (Gold Coast). His report is dated 5 August, 1903. Since he himself has seen only 5 babies alive he must have had his visit to the Negress on the 21st of April. The dead child was, however, produced from a small tin box and all six were laid out for a photography to be taken by a missionary friend of Dr Vortisch, of Alburia.⁸⁰ Another picture of the sextuplet was taken by a Negro photographer.

It is strange that Vortisch talks of the Negress as an inhabitant of Christiansborg. He mentions that the news of the sextuplets attracted very large crowds around the native hut so that the Government had to order six guards, one for the protection of each baby.⁸¹ Though there are slight discrepancies in the prin-

⁷⁹ KERR J. W. & COOKMAN H., *A remarkable case of multiple pregnancy*. Med. Press & Circ., Lond., 1903, n. ser., 75: 537-38, photo.

⁸⁰ H. VORTISCH, *Afrikanische Sechslinge*. Münch. med. Wschr., 1903, 50: 1639-40, Sept. 22., photo. – According to the author, the photography is the one made by the Negro artist.

⁸¹ SCHLIEBEN, who refers to this case on p. 266 of his article (see footnote 33), commits the mistake that he puts the date of the West-African sextuplet birth at 5 August, which is the date of the report of Vortisch. There is also some confusion as to the previous pregnancies of the mother. – KNIBBS G., writes on multiple births (J. Proc. R. Soc. N. S. Wales, 1925, 56:

ted reports on the Accra sextuplets, this should be considered an authentic case in every respect. In some reports the date of birth is incorrectly shifted to 1901.

19 1935. This is the date of an article written by J. G. de Lint on multiple births. In the article the author refers to a certain Dr Schroeder, in Düsseldorf, who mentioned a sextuplet birth in Egypt as a record achievement in the medical world. According to this information a woman in Ismailia, Egypt, gave birth to 4 girls and 2 boys at once, all of them being alive and feeling well. There is no further authority to this statement.⁸²

20 1950. A birth of sextuplets in the territory of Ruanda-Urundi has been reported by the Belgian press from Bruxelles. The news was taken over by the Italian *Il Tempo* on 2 March 1950.⁸³

The mother was supposed to be a native woman who delivered 4 boys and 2 girls at once. As usual in such notices it was added that the condition of the puerpera and of the sextette is 'satisfactory'. Did human sextuplet birth become as ordinary as to be accepted without further ado in the medical profession? At least I was unable to discover any comment on the Ruanda sextuplets in the professional press.

b) *Animal births*

21 1846. A very fertile cow which gave birth repeatedly to several calves at once had sextuplets which died prematurely. The cow is mentioned in 1857 in Macgillivray's *Manual of Veterinary Sciences*.⁸⁴

22 1902. There was a short notice on sexagemellity in a cow, published by De Bruin in this year.⁸⁵

23 1928. In Lauterseifen, Silesia, a farmer of a small property, called Gustave Ue., had to slaughter a cow because of a heartfailure in the animal. He discovered that the cow was pregnant with six calves. The director of the neighboring Agricultural College, Dr Böhme was called who photographed the animal.

The slaughtering occurred on 21 November, 1928. The total weight of the calves was 60 and a half kilograms. The cow was 2 years old, and the development of the calves progressed to the 245th day. There were three calves in each uterine horn. Five of the fetuses were female, one was a bull.

The case was described by C. H. Heidenreich who also published the photo-

128-45) and quotes the article of Vortisch, of Alburì, as one written by two authors, one of them being a certain Alburì.

⁸² LINT, *Ned. tschr. geneesk.*, 1935, 79: 4648-54.

⁸³ Un parto 'sestuplo' nell'Africa Centrale. "Il Tempo", 2 March, 1950. - I learned of this case in Prof. GEDDA's *Studio dei Gemelli*, (p. 160) (Roma, 1951), who was kind to send me a photograph of the Italian newspaper notice.

⁸⁴ Further confirmation is found in the Textbook of Veterinary Obstetrics of GEORGE FLEMING (London, 1878; p. 139 etc.).

⁸⁵ DE BRUIN, In *Ned. tschr. geneesk.*, 1902, v. 1: 712.

graph. He also referred to the work of Schmaltz which mentions two similar cases.⁸⁶ Heidenreich was veterinarian in Breslau.

24 1929. A case of sextuplet calves was reported by Busman.⁸⁷ On the 11th of June, 1929, at the slaughtering of a cow in Chicago, six calves were found in the uterus, 2 bulls and 4 females, in the 5th or 6th month of embryonal development. Three were in each uterine horn; each group of three had a separate fetal membrane.

25 1931. A purebred Romney ewe (with Registry No. 3866, ARB record) gave birth to six living lamb on 18 March, 1931, near Woodland, California. The ewe is the property of Dr E. E. BROWNELL, of San Francisco. This unusual event was reported in the literature by J. F. Wilson and D. W. Gregory⁸⁸ who also made a photograph of the lambs.

There is no doubt as to the veracity of the case. There were 3 males and 3 females. The ewe was 5 years old. One of the lambs died next day after birth due to pneumonia. The other 5 were alive on April 3, 1931.

It is very difficult to say something on the authenticity of sextuplet reports in general. The birth of sextuplets is not impossible physiologically though it will for ever remain an exceedingly rare statistical event, and as such it requires the utmost care in recording, with plenty of witnesses.

Casual newspaper announcements will never be accepted as decisive testimonies in a scrutiny of doubtful cases of sextuplets. Nevertheless, no rare event should be dismissed as false just for the lack of other, historically more acceptable evidence.

(Part II: Septuplets and Higher Births)

* TO BE CONTINUED *

⁸⁶ C. H. HEIDENREICH, *Sechslinge von einer Kuh*. Berl. tierärztl. Wschr., 1929, 45: 22, photo. — The work of SCHMALTZ is, *Das Geschlechtsleben unserer Haussäugetiere*.

⁸⁷ H. BUSMAN, *Multiple pregnancy in a cow*. J. Am. Vet. M. Ass., 1929, 75: 105.

⁸⁸ WILSON & GREGORY, *Sextuplet lambs*. J. Hered., 1931, 22: 229-30, photo.