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About the Troubles of Roman Men Conceiving a Descendant. Male Fertility Disorders in Ancient Rome

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SUMMARY

Παιδίον μὲν γὰρ οὐδεμία ποτὲ γυνὴ λέγεται ποιῆσαι δίχα κοινωνίας ἀνδρός – according to popular belief, no woman is ever able to conceive a child without the help of a man, according to Plutarch, who can hardly be considered an expert on the subject. Although in the ancient world it was universally believed that both men and women were needed for reproduction and that each played their own role in conceiving a child, infertility was usually blamed on the woman, although men whose wives had not become pregnant for a long time might have felt some anxiety.

In a patriarchal society where the primary purpose of marriage was to produce a legal offspring, all available methods and means were used to cure genital diseases and treat impotence, including seeking not only human but even divine help. In my paper I will try to present both medical and social aspects of male infertility. For this purpose, I will use both iconographic sources (ex-vota), such as the texts of Lucretius, Martial, Juvenal, Pliny, Gargilius, the advice preserved in the Cyranides collection, as well as the opinions of the greatest physicians of the time, namely Soranus, Celsus and Caelius Aurelianus.

KEYWORDS: Roman medicine, impotence, male infertility.

STRESZCZENIE

O kłopotach rzymskich mężczyzn z poczęciem potomka. Zaburzenia męskiej płodności w starożytnym Rzymie

Wedle przyjętej opinii żadna kobieta nie jest w stanie nigdy począć dziecka bez pomocy mężczyzny – pisał Plutarch, którego przecież jednak trudno uważać za jakiegoś specjalistę w tej kwestii. I chociaż w świecie starożytnym powszechnie uznawano, że zarówno mężczyźni, jak i kobiety potrzebni są do rozmnażania i odgrywają role przy poczęciu dziecka, to jednak niepłodność zrzucano zazwyczaj na kobiety. Jednak również mężczyznę, którego żona długo nie zachodziła w upragnioną ciążę, mógł ogarniać pewien niepokój. W patriarchalnie zorganizowanym społeczeństwie, w którym podstawowym celem małżeństwa było wydanie na świat le-

galnego potomka, w razie potrzeby odwoływano się do wszelkich dostępnych metod i środków, by leczyć choroby narządów płciowych i zwalczać impotencję, a szukano w tym celu pomocy nie tylko ludzkiej, lecz także boskiej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: niepłodność męska, medycyna rzymska, impotencja, problemy z płodnością.

As Plutarch argued, no woman is able to conceive a child without the help of a man¹. Although in ancient times it was understood and acknowledged that both men and women were needed for reproduction and played their part in the conception of a child, women were usually blamed for infertility².

In case of women, medical (checking the physical constitution and regularity of menstruation) or folk methods of diagnosing fertility (e.g., by incensing) were proposed³. Although, of course, the only definitive proof of their effectiveness was pregnancy. If such a problem affected men, only the birth of a child during matrimony could prove it. Maybe we should read between the lines of Pliny the Younger's letter to Lucius Calpurnius Fabatus, his wife's grandfather⁴. Pliny, whose young wife Calpurnia had recently suffered a miscarriage, was probably very upset, but at the same time the fact that the woman had become pregnant must have at least partially reassured him. Pliny probably doubted his own virility and fertility, or worse, suspected that others might feel the same about him. His previous marriage had been a childless one, even though it had lasted for nearly ten years. Therefore, his earnest explanations to Fabatus, that the miscarriage was proof of his wife's fertility and that the promised grandchildren would surely be born soon, may indicate that he was trying to justify himself and to dispel any doubts⁵. This young woman's miscarriage confirmed her fertility and, by implication, also his⁶.

¹ Plut. *Mor. Coniugalia praecepta* 145d: Παιδίον μὲν γὰρ οὐδεμία ποτὲ γυνὴ λέγεται ποιῆσαι δίχα κοινωνίας ἀνδρός.

² See, for example: A. Tatarkiewicz, *Mater in statu nascendi. Społeczne i medyczne aspekty zdrowia reprodukcyjnego w starożytnym Rzymie*, Poznań 2018, pp. 65, 71–74.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 68–71.

⁴ Plin. *Ep.* VIII 10: "Quo magis cupis ex nobis pronepotes videre, hoc tristior audies neptem tuam abortum fecisse, dum se praegnantem esse puellariter nescit, ac per hoc quaedam custodienda praegnantibus omittit, facit omittenda".

⁵ On the marriages of Pliny the Younger: R. Winsbury, *Pliny the Younger. A Life in Roman Letters*, London 2013, pp. 126–133.

⁶ The couple never had children.

The fact that the Romans were well aware that the problems of procreation also affected men can be seen at the end of the fourth book of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*. The author's statement on procreation begins with an evocative description:

Nor do the powers divine grudge any man
 The fruits of his seed-sowing, so that never
 He be called "father" by sweet children his,
 And end his days in sterile love forever.
 What many men suppose; and gloomily
 They sprinkle the altars with abundant blood,
 And make the high platforms odorous with burnt gifts,
 To render big by plenteous seed their wives –
 And plague in vain godheads and sacred lots⁷.
 (Translated by W.E. Leonard)

The poet describes men who spend a great deal of energy, and perhaps a considerable amount of money, in unsuccessful pleas to the gods to allow them to become fathers⁸. However, far from understanding or even sympathising with their distress, Lucretius clearly states that such an approach is completely wrong: it is not the gods who are responsible for their childlessness, but themselves, or rather the poor quality of their sperm⁹. Therefore he states:

For sterile are these men by seed too thick,
 Or else by far too watery and thin.
 Because the thin is powerless to cleave
 Fast to the proper places, straightaway
 It trickles from them, and, returned again,
 Retires abortively. And then since seed
 More gross and solid than will suit is spent

⁷ Lucr. IV 1233–1247: "Nec divina satum genitalem numina cuiquam/ absterrent, pater a gnatis ne dulcibus umquam / appelletur et ut sterili Venere exigit aevom / quod plerumque putant et multo sanguine maesti / conspergunt aras adolentque altaria donis / ut gravidas reddant uxores semine largo / ne quiquam divom numen sortisque fatigant".

⁸ F. Tutrone, *Physiologizing (In)Fertility in the Roman World: Lucretius on Sacrifice, Nature, and Generation*, "Medicina nei secoli. Arte e scienza" 2016, 28 (3), pp. 773–804.

⁹ On the history of semen research: F.T. Andrade-Rocha, *On the Origins of the Semen Analysis: A Close Relationship with the History of the Reproductive Medicine*, "Journal of Human Reproductive Sciences" 2017, 10 (4), pp. 242–255; A.M. Devine, *The Low Birth-Rate in Ancient Rome: A Possible Contributing Factor*, "Rheinisches Museum für Philologie" 1985, 128 (3–4), pp. 313–317: considers that a reason for the low fertility rate in Rome may have been the widespread availability and popularity of baths. Or, more precisely, bathing in hot water, which (as it is known today) impaired the quality of male semen.

By some men, either it flies not forth amain
 With spurt prolonged enough, or else it fails
 To enter suitably the proper places,
 Or, having entered, the seed is weakly mixed
 With seed of the woman: harmonies of Venus
 Are seen to matter vastly here¹⁰.
 (Translated by W.E. Leonard)

As the problem was considered to be serious, attempts were made to explain it in various ways. It was quite commonly believed that:

things on the earth are believed to be in sympathy with those up above; [...] the generative faculties in ourselves as well as in other animals are said to increase with the waxing moon but to decrease with the waning moon¹¹.
 (Translated by O. Temkin)

Men's fertility may also have been affected by other factors, such as general ill-health, as is the case with women's fertility:

then [it] produces the least fertile seed, that is, either weak, or poor, or watery, or fat, or cool, or hot, that is, spoiled¹².
 (The English version based on the Polish translation by W.J. Maciejewski)

In a similar vein to Cellius Aurelianus, another physician, Soranus, expresses his views. He emphasises that:

[...] thus intercourse shall be practised neither when the body is in want, nor, on the other hand, when it is heavy as it is in indigestion and drunkenness. First, because the body in a natural state performs its proper functions but it is not in a natural state at the time of drunkenness and indigestion. [...] But in drunkenness and indigestion all vapor is spoilt and thus the pneuma too is rendered turbid. Therefore danger arises lest by reason of the bad material contributed the seed too change for the worse. Furthermore, satiety due to heavy drinking hinders the attachment of the seed to the uterus. Just as in drunken people the wine, by vigorously rising up makes wounds dif-

¹⁰ Lucr. IV 1237–1247: “nam steriles nimium crasso sunt semine partim / et liquido praeter iustum tenuique vicissim / tenve locis quia non potis est adfigere adhaesum / liquitur extemplo et revocatum cedit abortu / crassius hinc porro quoniam concretius aequo/ mittitur, aut non tam prolixo provolat ictu / aut penetrare locos aequae nequit aut penetratum / aegre admiscetur muliebri semine semen/ nam multum harmoniae Veneris differre videntur”.

¹¹ Soranus I, X, 41: τινὲς δὲ τῶν παλαιῶν καὶ τοὺς ἀπὸ τῶν ἔξωθεν καιροὺς ὥρισαν-ἐπιτήδειον γὰρ εἶναι τὸν καιρὸν πληρουμένης τῆς σελήνης. [...] οὕτως καὶ τὰς σπερματικὰς δυνάμεις ἐν ἡμῖν τε καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ζῴοις αὐξεσθαι μὲν πληρουμένης τῆς σελήνης, ἐλαττωθῆναι δὲ μειουμένης.

¹² Cael. Aurel. II, 64: “aut debile et tenue aut aequatum aut grassum vel frigidum aut fervens sive corruptum”.

ficult to unite, it stands to reason that the attachment of the seed is disturbed by the same cause¹³.

(Translated by O. Temkin)

Failure to conceive could also be caused by having been injured or having suffered from certain illnesses previously¹⁴. Celius Aurelianus wrote about the clearly negative effect of urogenital disorders on male fertility, stating that when:

[...] the opening of the penis would be lateral, or it would not be in the place intended by nature, or the penis itself would slip out as a result of tension, or [the man] would be one of those whom the Greeks call hypospadias [i.e. a person with a scrotal opening that is too low], these [reasons] prevent the duty of procreation¹⁵.

(The English version based on the Polish translation by W.J. Maciejewski)

Diseases that were thought to lead directly (or indirectly, by restricting sexual intercourse) to difficulty in conceiving included abundant semen discharge “without sexual intercourse and without nocturnal lustful dreams, which after a prolonged period leads to death by debilitation”¹⁶, tumours and other penile diseases¹⁷, testicular diseases¹⁸, varicose veins on the scrotum¹⁹, hydrocele

¹³ Soranus I, X, 38: οὕτως δὲ καὶ τὴν ὑστέραν ἀτονωτέραν οὖσαν εἰκὸς καὶ περὶ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τοιαύτην ἔσεσθαι, τὸ δὲ συλλαβεῖν ὑστέρας ἔργον [...] κίνδυνος οὖν ὑπὸ φαύλων τῶν ἐπιχορηγουμένων καὶ τὸ σπέρμα ἐπὶ τὸ φαυλότερον μεταβαλεῖν. εἴτα καὶ <ῆ> διὰ τὴν μέθην πολυυλία κωλυτικὴ <τῆς>. πρὸς τὴν ὑστέραν γίνεται κολλησεως τοῦ σπέρματος- ὥς γὰρ τὰ ἐπὶ τῶν μεθύνων τράυματα δυσσύμφυτα ποιεῖ διὰ τὴν πολλὴν ἀναφορὰν ὁ οἶνος, οὕτως εὐλογον καὶ τὴν τοῦ σπέρματος κόλλησιν ὑπὸ τῆς αὐτῆς αἰτίας ἐπιταράττεσθαι.

¹⁴ See, for example, D. Gourevitch, *Sur l'andrologie pathologique de Galien*, “Medicina nei Secoli” 2001, 13 (2), pp. 333–347.

¹⁵ Cael. Aurel. II, 64: “aut si perseveraverint in corpore vitia, aut veretri caverna obliqua sit, aut non naturali loco constituta, aut ipsum veretrum adductione surreptum, aut in hiis quos Greci yspodias vocant, non aliter generandi negant officium”.

¹⁶ Celsus IV, 28: “Est etiam circa naturalia vitium, nimia profusio seminis; quod sine venere, sine nocturnis imaginibus sic fertur, ut interpositio spatio tabe hominem consumat”.

¹⁷ Celsus VI, 18, 3: “Haec citra cancrum sunt; qui cum in reliquis partibus tum in his quoque vel praecipue ulcera infestat [...] Ac si cancer ipsum colem occupavit, inspergenda aliqua sunt ex adurentibus, maximeque id, quod ex calce, chalcitide, auripigmento componitur. Si medicamenta vincuntur, hic quoque scalpello quicquid corruptum est, sic ut aliquid etiam integri trahat, praecidi debet”.

¹⁸ Celsus VI, 18, 6: “In testiculis vero si qua inflammatio sine ictu orta est, sanguis a talo mittendus est; a cibo abstinendum [...] ex ictu tument, sanguinem mitti necessarium est, magisque si etiam livent. Inponendum vero utrumlibet ex iis, quae cum cumino conponuntur supraque posita sunt”.

¹⁹ Celsus VII, 18, 9–10: “Praeter haec aequae integris tunicis ramex innascitur: cirsocelen Graeci appellant. Venae intumescunt, eaeque intortae conglomerataeque a superiore parte

testis²⁰ and other conditions, for example ulcers of various origins. Celsus suggests treatments for the ailments mentioned above, ranging from suggestions about washing, the use of ointments, the implementation of a special diet or changes in lifestyle, but above all he focuses on solving such problems through surgery²¹.

It was also noted that fatherhood problems could be related to age, although it was known that, unlike women, men theoretically remained fertile no matter how old they were. Pliny mentions the cases of King Masinissa and Cato the Elder, who became fathers in their 80s²². However, it was pointed out that as a man grows older, problems of a different nature could arise, to which Juvenal alludes in one of his works:

(...) and as for sex its now long-forgotten,
Or should you try, his limp prick with its swollen vein, just
Lies there, lies there though you pummel it all night long.
What else could you expect from such feeble white-haired Loins?²³
(Translated by A.S. Kline)

In non-medical literature, erectile dysfunction is cited as the most common cause of male infertility²⁴. Justinian, when introducing the law restricting divorce, pointed out that one of the reasons why a marriage could be dissolved was

vel ipsum scrotum inplent vel mediam tunicam vel imam: interdum etiam sub ima tunica circa ipsum testiculum nervumque eius increscunt. Ex his eae, quae in ipso scroto sunt, oculis patent: eae vero, quae mediae imaeve tunicae insident, ut magis conditae non aequae quidem cernuntur, sed tamen etiam visui subiectae sunt, praeterquam quod et tumoris aliquid est pro venarum magnitudine ac modo, et id prementi magis renititur ac per ipsos venarum toros inaequale est et, qua parte id est, testiculus magis iusto dependet. Cum vero etiam super ipsum testiculum nervumque eius id malum increvit, aliquanto longius testiculus ipse descendit, minorque altero fit, ut pote alimento amisso. Raro sed aliquando caro quoque inter tunicas increscit: sarcocelen Graeci vocant”.

²⁰ Celsus VII, 18, 7–8: “Graeci communi nomine, quicquid est, hydrocelen appellant [...] venae quoque in scroto inflantur, et, si digito pressimus, cedit umor circumfluensque id, quod non premitur, attollit et tamquam in vitro cornuve per scrotum apparet, estque, quantum in ipso est, sine dolore”.

²¹ I. Mazzini, *Landrologia celsiana ed il suo contesto*, “Medicina nei secoli” 2001, 13 (2), pp. 313–332.

²² Plin. *HN* VII 14, 61: “nam in viris Masinissam regem post LXXXVI annum generasse filium, quem Methimannum appellaverit, clarum est, Catonem censorium octogesimo exacto e filia Salonis clientis sui”.

²³ Iuv. *Sat.* X, 204–209: “[...] nam coitus iam longa oblivio, vel si coneris, iacet exiguus cum ramice nervuset, quamvis tota palpetur nocte, iacebit. anne aliud sperare potest haec inguinis aegri canities? quid quod merito suspecta libido est quae venerem adfectat sine viribus?”.

²⁴ Ch. Laes, *Impotence*, in: *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, ed. R.S. Bagnall et al., Chichester 2016.

precisely because of the spouse's impotence. If the husband "suffered from impotence" continuously for the first two years of the marriage, the wife's family had the right to request a divorce while retaining the dowry²⁵. Such a man could not be the father of legitimate children, which was the primary purpose of a Roman marriage²⁶.

Impotence, which was not only a medical problem, became one of the favorite themes of Martial's mocking poetry and appeared in his works often in the context of infertility or childlessness, such as in this short poem:

Almo's household consists of eunuchs and he doesn't rise himself; and he grumbles because his Polla gives birth to nothing²⁷.
(Translated by D.R. Shackleton Bailey)

The aforementioned Juvenal wrote in a similar way:

[...] if it had not been for this loyal And devoted client, your wife would have stayed a virgin?

[...]

Ungrateful perfidious one, is it worth nothing to you, Nothing at all, that your little son or daughter's my doing? You're happy enough to accept them, and splash the news Of your virility all over the papers. Garland your doors, You're a father, I've given you ammunition against gossip. You're a parent, in law, through me wills treat you as such, You can garner bequests intact, and the sweet windfalls too. And extra benefits will even accrue along with those gifts If I add to the numbers, if I should make it a trio²⁸.
(Translated by A.S. Kline)

²⁵ Cod. Iust. 5.17.10: "In causis iam dudum specialiter definitis, ex quibus recte mittuntur repudia, illam addimus, ut, si maritus uxori ab initio matrimonii usque ad duos continuos annos computandos coire minime propter naturalem imbecillitatem valeat, possit mulier vel eius parentes sine periculo dotis amittendae repudium marito mittere, ita tamen, ut ante nuptias donatio eidem marito servetur".

²⁶ Dig. 1.1.1.3: "ius naturale est, quod natura omnia animalia docuit: [...] hinc descendit maris atque feminae coniunctio, quam nos matrimonium appellamus, hinc liberorum procreation".

²⁷ Mart. X, 91: "Omnes eunuchos habet Almo nec arrigit ipse: / Et queritur, pariat quod sua Polla nihil".

²⁸ Iuv. *Sat.* IX, 70–86: "Verum, ut dissimules, ut mittas cetera, quantometiris pretio quod, ni tibi deditus essem devotusque cliens, uxor tua virgo maneret? scis certe quibus ista modis, quam saepe rogaris et quae pollicitus, fugientem nempe puellam amplexu rapui; tabulas quoque ruperat et iam signabat; tota vix hoc ego nocte redemite plorante foris. testis mihi lectulus et tu, ad quem pervenit lecti sonus et dominae vox. instabile ac dirimi coeptum et iam paene solutum coniugium in multis domibus servavit adulter. quo te circumagas? quae prima aut ultima ponas? nullum ergo meritum est, ingratus ac perfide, nullum quod tibi filiulus, quod filia nascitur ex me? tollis enim et libris actorum spargere gaudes argumenta viri. foribus suspende coronas: iam pater est, dedimus quod famae opponere possis".

While the Romans made fun of male impotence, they tried to combat impotence with various remedies, primarily aphrodisiacs. Such ‘lust aids’ mentioned by Pliny include, for example, the leek, which ‘stimulates the amorous desires’²⁹, the leaves and root of the turpentine tree³⁰, asparagus and wild asparagus, as well as the water in which there were boiled³¹, the root of the reed³² or helichrysum in vinegar³³. Popular aphrodisiacs also include garlic “grated with fresh coriander and drunk with clear wine”³⁴. Fennel seeds served with clear wine were said to have a similar effect³⁵. It was thought that eating asparagus and carrots would stimulate desire³⁶. According to the ancient authors, chervil (*anthriscus*) “helps a tired body, revives those who are weary and stimulates sexual intercourse already weakened by age”³⁷.

Aphrodisiacs and impotence remedies were made not only from plants but also from ground stones. Magical amulets were prepared from those parts of animal bodies that were considered symbols of strength and/or vitality. For example, it was recommended that amulets be made from fox testicles. The *Kyranides* collection contains instructions for such remedies:

The right testicle [of a fox], powdered and added to a drink, is an aphrodisiac for women, while the left testicle is an aphrodisiac for men. Wearing the member [of the fox] gives one a great erection, also when dried into a powder and added to a drink, and the testicles, also dried and drunk with a drink, do the same. Just add a tablespoon of this powder. This is a reliable remedy that harmlessly induces an erection and increases undying desire. And if you cut off the testicles of a living animal, and then, after you have cured it, release it and hang the testicles on your body, you will immediately have an erection [...]. If you wrap the end of the penis in a bladder or skin, on which you

²⁹ Plin. *HN* XX 21, 47: “inponitur et vulneribus, venerem stimulat [...]”. The salutary effect of the leek is also mentioned, for example, by Gargilius [Garg. XXI, 7; XXI, 21].

³⁰ Plin. *HN* XXIV 28, 43: “medetur et attritis partibus sive oleo e semine eius facto ceraeque mixto sive foliis ex oleo decoctis, si hae cum aqua ita foveantur”.

³¹ Plin. *HN* XX 42, 108: “venerem stimulant; 43,111: item veneri, vesicae quoque nisi decoctum”.

³² Plin. *HN* XXIV 28, 43: “eadem recens trita et in vino pota venerem concitat”.

³³ Plin. *HN* XXIV 89, 140: “actis quoque ubertatem faciunt in cibis et infantibus inlita capillum aiunt, ex aceto edentium venerem stimulant”.

³⁴ Plin. *HN* XX 23, 57: “venerem quoque stimulare cum coriandro viridi tritum potumque e mero”.

³⁵ Garg. XXV 13 [ed. V. Rose XXV 20]: “simili modo temperatum venerem stimulat”.

³⁶ Garg. XXXI 10 [ed. V. Rose XXXI 10]: “semen eorum tritum cum vino potum venerem stimulat”; Garg. XXXIII 7 [ed. V. Rose XXXIII 16]: “venerem stimulat copiosior in cibo sumpta”.

³⁷ Plin. *HN* XXII 38: “peculiaris laus eius, quod fatigato venere corpori succurrit marcentisque iam senio coitus excitat”.

write with myrrh ink the words *tin bib elithi*, and hang it close to your body, you will be able to have an intercourse without risk [...]. The kidneys of a fox, eaten or drunk, increase desire³⁸.

(The English translation based on the Polish version by E. Żybert)

The products mentioned above suggest the existence of a specialised market offering stimulants and treatments for impotence, which was clearly not just a fertility problem³⁹. In this context, the advice of the physician Priscianus, who proposed using yet another remedy for impotence, namely reading erotic stories, is not surprising. The emotions that could be felt while reading were said to be so powerful that they were recommended to cure impotence⁴⁰.

However, when none of the tips and suggestions worked, people turned to the gods for their blessings and help⁴¹. We owe our knowledge of some of these deities, or rather their names and sometimes their scope of action to the writings of the Church Fathers, particularly Augustine of Hippo and Tertullian. Although their main aim was to combat superstition and overthrow traditional Roman religion, it is their works that provide us with most information on this subject. For example, one could turn to Janus, who “opened the entrance for the reception of semen,” to Saturn, who gave “fertility”, or to Liber, who “frees man by making him produce semen”⁴².

³⁸ *Kyranides* II, 2: “ὁ δὲ ὄρχις ὁ δεξιὸς ξηρός, λεῖος ἐπιπασθεὶς ἐν ποτῷ, φιλτροπόσιμόν ἐστιν ἐπὶ γυναικῶν, ὁ δὲ εὐόνυμος ἐπὶ ἀνδρῶν. τὸ δὲ ἄκρον αὐτοῦ περιαφθὲν μεγίστην ἔντασιν ποιεῖ. ὁμοίως καὶ λεῖον ἐπιπασθὲν ἐν ποτῷ λάθρα. καὶ οἱ ὄρχεις πινόμενοι ξηροὶ τὸ αὐτὸ δρῶσιν. δίδου δὲ ὅσον κοχλιαρίου πληθός. τοσοῦτον δὲ ἐστιν ἀνυτικὸν ὥστε ἀβλαβῆ τὴν ἔντασιν ποιεῖν καὶ τὴν πύρωσιν ἀδιάψευστον τηρεῖν. // τοὺς ὄρχεις τούτου ζῶντος τοῦ ζῶου ἔκκοψον- εἴτα ζῶντα μὲν αὐτὸν ἀπόλυσον, θεραπεύσας δὲ περίαψον. ἐὰν γὰρ αὐτῶν τοὺς διδύμους ὡς εἴρηται περιάψῃς, πάραυτα ἐντείνει. τινὲς δὲ αὐτοὺς βάλλουσιν εἰς τὰ ἰσχία τοῦ τράγου. // ἐὰν δὲ τοῦ αἰδοίου αὐτοῦ τὸ ἄκρον ἐν κύστει ἢ ἐν δέρματι ἐνδήσῃς, ἐν ᾧ ἐπιγράψῃς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦτο διὰ συμρνομέλανος ‘τὶν βιβ ἡλιθι’ καὶ περιάψῃς, ἀβλαβῶς συνουσιάσεις. // [...] οἱ δὲ νεφροὶ αὐτοῦ ἐσθιόμενοι ἢ πινόμενοι ἀφροδίσια παρορμῶσιν”.

³⁹ A. McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History*, Chicago 2009.

⁴⁰ Th. Prisc., *Euporista*, 2.11.34: “[...] ad delicias animum pertrahentibus [...] ceteris suaviter amatorias fabulas describentibus”.

⁴¹ E.T.L. Neto, P.V. Bach, R.J.L. Lyra et al., *Gods Associated with Male Fertility and Virility*, “Andrology” 2019, 7 (3) pp. 267–272, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/andr.12599> (accessed: 2.08.2023); A. Tatarkiewicz, *Ciąża, poród i potóg pod opieką rzymskich bogów*, red. K. Kochańczyk-Bonińska, L. Misiarczyk, Warsaw 2015 (vol. 19, *Studia Antiquitatis Christianae*), pp. 57–70.

⁴² Aug. *De Civitate Dei* VII 2: “Nam ipse primum Ianus, cum puerperium concipitur, unde illa cuncta opera sumunt exordium minutatim minutis distributa numinibus, aditum aperit recipiendo semini. Ibi est et Saturnus propter ipsum semen; ibi Liber, qui marem effuso semine liberat”.

In various regions of the Roman world, we can find traces of the existence of shrines visited by people who came to ask for help and divine protection. Anatomical votive offerings (usually made of terracotta) representing diseased or healed organs were deposited there (e.g. photos 1, 2)⁴³.



Photo 1. Anatomical votive offerings

Source: © Wellcome Collection CC-BY-4.0, <https://iiif.wellcomecollection.org/image/L0035805/full/full/0/default.jpg>

Studies of such findings have shown that most of these terracotta representations of the male genitalia have a healthy and normal structure. However, some were indicative of other urogenital diseases already mentioned above. There were also some votive offerings whose appearance indicated problems with phimosis, hypospadias, varicocele, penile torsion or erectile problems⁴⁴.

If both spouses were theoretically considered healthy and fertile, but could not have children together, the last resort was... to change partners! It was believed that there was “a peculiar contradiction of bodies between one another, and those

⁴³ E. Guner, S.I. Guner, K.G. Seker et al., *Ancient Healing Temples Specialized in Urogenital Diseases*, “European Urology Supplements” 2018, 17 (2), pp. e250–e251.

⁴⁴ E. Guner, A. Kadioglu, *Specific Urogenital Disease Information-Revealing Male Genital Votive Offerings Dedicated to Gods in Ancient Age Sanctuary Medicine*, “Archivos Españoles de Urología” 2021, 74 (2), pp. 239–246.



Photo 2. Anatomical votive offerings

Source: © Wellcome Collection CC-BY-4.0, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/gz422vav?wellcomeImagesUrl=/indexplus/image/L0035977.html>

who are infertile between themselves give birth by being united with others, such as Augustus and Livia”⁴⁵.

Diagnosis and advice on the best conditions for conceiving a child included an assessment of the anatomy of the genitals, their external appearance, the man’s lifestyle and diet. The most commonly cited problems with conceiving a legitimate child included age, poor sperm quality, ‘unhygienic’ lifestyles and the diseases and mechanical injuries that could result, but also birth defects and impotence. Several attempts have been made to address such concerns. Help was sought from folk medicine, surgery or the gods, depending on the nature of the problem. However, sometimes, despite (theoretically) favourable circumstances or the use of all available means of medicine, folk beliefs, religion or magic, the marriage remained childless.

⁴⁵ Plin. *HN* VII, 13, 57: “Est quaedam privatim dissociatio corporum, et inter se steriles, ubi cum aliis iunxere se, gignunt, sicut Augustus et Livia”.

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