

7. Owners of Their Own Bodies: Women's Magical Knowledge and Reproduction in Greek Inscriptions

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1. Introduction

This chapter explores epigraphic evidence attesting what ancient Greek women knew about the use of magic for controlling fertility.¹ Compared with the literary texts, epigraphy displays a wider array of social interactions in which women were leading protagonists. While undoubtedly there are challenges involved in working with such sources, inscriptions, when available, are crucial for better understanding the active female contribution to family healthcare. Yet, scholars interested in ancient women and medicine have not fully explored Greek inscriptions, particularly those on curse tablets and amulets. Although inscriptions such as the oracular tablets from Dodona, the healing miracle stories from Epidauros, and the dedications from the sanctuary of Artemis Brauronia at Athens have been considered together with the Hippocratic treatises (Flemming 2013, 581-88), curse tablets and amulets remain confined to the desks of historians of religions. Yet these two genres of documents can contribute significantly to the scholarly search for evidence of women's knowledge of reproduction as expressed in healing rituals.

The choice of curse tablets and amulets causes an inevitable enlargement of the chronological and geographical limits of the enquiry. Indeed, the dates of the curses and amulets selected for this paper span over the first four centuries CE, and are from different areas of the ancient Greek-speaking world, from mainland Greece to Asia Minor. Furthermore, two methodological questions immediately emerge: can we distinguish “magic” from “religion”? And in what sense can we separate “religious” practices from “medical” therapies? A single chapter is not enough to explore these issues at length (see, among many others, Lanata 1967; Versnel 1991; Gordon 1995; Dasen 2011, 73 n. 1). I will only mention that in antiquity, at a socio-cultural level, the realms of magic, religion, and medicine were strictly interconnected. Medical anthropologists have examined how the experience of disease is informed by social inequality, relationships of domination, and factors such as economy and poverty, while anthropologists have defined “ritual” as a

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performative action and/or utterance whose efficacy in transforming realities is guaranteed by the performance of the ritual itself (Tambiah 1985). In particular, rituals are considered crucial in the process of shaping social identities and relationships, as well as in the affirmation of social power and hierarchies. The healing rituals found on amulets and curse tablets, then, can be more fruitfully studied when medical anthropology and a performative approach to ritual are integrated (Sax 2010).

This chapter combines insights gained from both strands of anthropological literature in its exploration of how women used curse tablets and amulets for addressing their medical needs and for defining their social identity. The emphasis will be on women as knowledgeable of their own bodies and as ritually competent, rather than on women viewed exclusively as mothers. It asks: do curse tablets and amulets provide evidence for women's knowledge about sexual reproduction? Were women independent from men when they made decisions about their reproductive needs and ritual cures? Do curse tablets and amulets offer a picture different from that of ancient medical writings? Or did women's knowledge as it appears on curse tablets and amulets then get adopted in medical practice and enter the Hippocratic corpus? After a careful review of evidence, this chapter returns to these questions in its conclusion.

2. Cursing the Womb: Reproduction and Aggressive Magic

Throughout antiquity, pregnancy and childbirth were considered not only physically, but also ritually, dangerous phases (see Parker 1983, 48-66, and in Roman religion see Lennon 2012, 58-61). In order to enhance protection in this critical moment, ancient Greek women exploited religion and magic, invoking divine help and performing magical rites in a number of ways. The power of ritual actions was often combined with pharmacology and herbal medicine, although the efficacy of these methods is a topic of scholarly debate (see recently Totelin 2009, 214-24). Furthermore, the idea that the womb was a live and independent organ within a woman's body (see for example, Pl. *Tim.* 91c; *PGM VII* 260-71) meant that its activities could be controlled through rituals and treatments.

In the realm of reproductive rituals, the supernatural agent could be called upon for both protective and aggressive aims. A recently published text opens new perspectives on aggressive magical practices around fertility. It is a curse written on a

lead tablet and comes from the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore in Corinth. Corinth, destroyed in 146 BCE, was refounded after 44 BCE as a new Roman *colonia*; the sanctuary stayed a place of worship until the end of the fourth century CE (Stroud 2014, 189). The sanctuary buildings were altered in the Roman period, but the cult maintained its Greek origins, although it was integrated into the Imperial religious context (Bookidis 2005, 162f.). Seventeen inscribed lead tablets in standard Attic or *koine* standard, with occasional doricisms, and one in Latin, have been found (Stroud 2013, 81-157). They are dated to the Roman period, around the first and second century CE. In six tablets the victim is a woman, while three have female authorship.

Ten of the excavated tablets have been found clustered around four low stone bases in the southern end of a room, called by the excavators the Building of the Tablets. Fragments of lamps, incense burners, and small vessels found together with the lead tablets suggested to the excavators that incense, lighting, and libation ceremonies accompanied the oral recitation of spells and the deposition of the tablets. The ritual activity in this room seems to have been mainly nocturnal (see Stroud 2013, 138-53, for a detailed description of the archaeological context of the tablets). One of the most interesting texts from the Building of the Tablets is a curse written against a woman, Karpime Babbia. Two other curses were directed against the same woman (Stroud 2013, nos. 123 and 124), and since the handwriting presents some similarities, perhaps one person dedicated them all (Stroud 2013, 103). In the following text, the author, most probably a woman, asks fertility for herself, and destruction for Karpime Babbia:

125 Παρατίτομα[ι] καὶ καταθί[το]μα[ι] Καρπί-
 μην Βαβίαν στεφανηπλόκον Μοίραις Π-
 ραξιδικαίσις ὅπως ἐγδεικ[ήσ]ωσι τὰς ὕβρ{ι}εις,
 4 Ἑρμῆ Χθονίῳ, Γῆ, Γῆς παισίν, [ὄ]πως κατεργά-
 σωνται καὶ διεργάσωνται ψ[υ]χὴν αὐτῆς κα-
 ἰ νοῦν αὐτῆς [καὶ] φρένες ν
 Καρπίμης Βαβίας σ[τ]εφανη[π]λόκου. ὀρκίζ-
 8 ω σε καὶ ἐναρῶμαί σε καὶ ἐνεύχομαί σ-
 <σοι, Ἑρμῆ Χθόνιε, τὰ μεγάλα *vacat 0.05m*
 126 ὀ[νύ]ματα τῆς Ἀνάγκης ΝΕΒΕΖΑΠ
 ΑΔΑΙΕΙΣΕΝ[.]ΓΕΙΒΗΩΗΕΡΑ κάρπισαί
 12 με, τὸ μέγα ὄν[υ]μα τὸ ἐπάνανκον, ὃ οὐκ εὐ-

χερῶς ὀνθμάζεται, ἄν μὴ ἐπὶ μεγάλαις ἀν-
ανκαίαις), ΕΥΦΕΡ, μέγα ὄνυμα, κἀρπισταί με καὶ κα-
τέργασαι Καρπίμην Βαβίαν στεφ[α]-
16 νηπλόκον ἀπὸ κεφαλῆς μέχρι ἰχνέων
ἰς) ἐπιμήνωον κατεργασ[ί]αν.

I entrust and consign Karpime Babbia, weaver of garlands, to the Fates who exact justice, so that they may punish her insolent behaviour, to Hermes of the Underworld, to Earth, to the children of Earth, so that they may subdue and completely destroy her soul and heart and her mind and the wits of Karpime Babbia, weaver of garlands. I adjure you and I implore you and I pray to you, Hermes of the Underworld, that the mighty names of Ananke, Nebezapadaieisen [.]geibebeohera, make me fertile; that the mighty name, the one carrying compulsion, which is not named recklessly unless in dire necessity, EUPHER, mighty name, make me fertile and destroy Karpime Babbia, weaver of garlands, from her head to her feet with monthly destruction. (Stroud 2013, nos. 125/126, second half of the first century to the early second century CE. English translation modified from Stroud 2013.)

The complexity of this document is instantly clear, but I will only discuss a few of the main aspects here. The text was engraved on two tablets rolled up and fastened together by a nail. Both tablets were folded seven times perpendicular to the lines of text: no. 125 was rolled from left to right, while no. 126 from right to left. The number seven probably held a magical meaning; and the process of folding the tablets seven times was probably an intentional part of the ritual (Stroud 2013, 104, fig. 80). The text seems to fit the category of “prayers for justice”, public appeals to a divinity in order to exact vengeance for an offense or injustice suffered by the author of the text (see Versnel 2010 on their differentiation from binding curses, in particular pp. 313-15 on these Corinthian tablets). However, as has been noted, the text combines elements of binding curses and of prayers for justice (Stroud 2014, 197). As Stroud (2013, 114) further observes: “The curse and punishment to be inflicted on Karpime Babbia occupy lines 1-7. Then, with asyndeton, the next seven lines are devoted to the prayer to Hermes Chthonios to the effect that the Great Names make the writer fertile. The text then ends with a four-line injunction to the Great Name, Ouphor, first, in inverse or chiasmic order, that the writer be made fertile, and second, that Karpime Babbia suffer total and lasting destruction”. If categorizations of the ancient sources

are an essential explanatory heuristic tool, each document might present peculiar characteristics that escape the known formula. I think it is worth noting that, while this inscription contains a vindictive prayer for justice, it seems that in addition to the cursing utterance the tablet was deposited as an intended fertility ritual.

The text, however, does not provide many details on the story behind it. In the attempt to guess the events that provoked it, it seems to be unquestionable that the main point at issue was fecundity. The author of the text may have been barren and may have been publicly ridiculed by Karpime Babbia (Versnel 2010, 314; Stroud 2013, 114). It is plausible to imagine a competition between the two women. While Karpime was able to produce offspring and was a serene mother of more than one healthy child, the writer had experienced several reproductive failures. She, then, felt envy for Karpime's fertility and her perfect motherhood. Even if these were not the exact details of the events, the *defigens* felt indeed a strong desire for vengeance, since she was asking for the complete destruction of her rival. The social setting of the Demetriad festival of the *Thesmophoria* probably fuelled the rumination of negative emotions in our writer (Salvo 2012). Surrounded by fertile women, mothers, and prospective mothers (Stroud 2013, 112; Spaeth 1996, 103-19), perhaps she could not bear any more mocking comments on her undefined social identity, being an adult woman without children.

The invocation of the Great Name *Eupher* (line 14) can be linked to the Egyptian spell *Ouphôr*: the different first letter can be interpreted as a spelling mistake, or perhaps it was written differently in the magical handbook from which the author copied the formula (Stroud 2013, no. 125/126, line 14, with Stroud 2013, 112f.). Stroud accepts the interpretation by Moyer and Dielmann, according to whom *Ouphôr* indicates a spell employed for the vivification of the image engraved on a ring representing a divinity (Moyer and Dielmann 2003). *Ouphôr* is a transcription from the Egyptian *wp.t-r*, the "Opening of the Mouth", a ritual that was intended to bring to life mummies, statues, and more generally images in funerary or liturgical ceremonies (Moyer and Dielmann 2003, 49). Following this line of thought, it is tempting to speculate that perhaps the invocation to *Eupher* was directed at a figurine that the writer molded and deposited together with the tablet, and the spell *Eupher/Ouphôr* was recited in order to vivify the object.

Another detail is worth highlighting. The temporal specification of a "monthly destruction" (l. 17), together with a wish for total annihilation, seems to imply a

specific reference to Karpime's womb and her menstrual cycle. The victim might have been afflicted by painful and particularly unpleasant menstrual periods that consequently meant not being able to bear children (Stroud 2013, 114). The Greek word *κατεργασία* means literally “working up”, and is used for food in the sense of “stewing, boiling” (LSJ). The intended destruction might have entailed also an internal “boiling” of the blood caused by a dysfunctional disease. The sensation of boiling blood might be caused by a feverish condition, and, according to Aristotle, physicians recognized the emotion of anger in this symptom (Arist. *De anim.* 403A31). The supposition of a connection between the curse and a specific illness is triggered by the parallel with similar prayers for justice from Knidos (modern Turkey), where one of the punishments invoked by the author of the cursing prayer is an inner “fever” (see *e.g. I. Knidos* 148). Furthermore, it is reasonable to add that the wished-for destruction of Karpime would have been not only physical but also psychological: each month her painful period would also have destroyed her hope for a child, increasing her feeling of longing for a pregnancy that supernatural powers would have impeded.

As noted above, although in curse tablets formulaic expressions often recur, sometimes extra elements personalize the text, defying any modern classification. It is noteworthy that in this document—a prayer for justice—the request to make the author fertile goes beyond a wish for the satisfaction of revenge against a wrongdoer. It reveals the hope and aspiration of this woman to conceive, and the enormous fear of remaining totally sterile in a community of expecting mothers and puerperae. Furthermore, it is interesting to remember that Hippocratic medicine linked the reproductive function to the general health of a woman: sexual intercourse was considered to improve health and pregnancy was a sign of health (Hippoc. *Genit.* 4 = 7.476 Littrè; *Mul.* 5 = 8.28 Littrè; more references, with previous bibliography, in Totelin 2009, 200; Parker 2012, 121). Therefore, although a woman could have an unfruitful womb and still be healthy (King 2005, 157), infertility was probably seen as affecting the overall wellbeing of a woman. In this tablet, the invocation of divine helpers had two parallel aims—ruin of the victim and prosperity of the agent—and this structure transforms the curse into a ritual for getting pregnant and regaining health. The fertility ritual probably included the hope of giving birth to a healthy baby, since to conceive was not always enough for giving birth to a baby, as a recipe for a woman who wants to get pregnant *and* to bear children implies (Hippoc. *Superf.*

29 = 8.494 Littrè). If we remember that the author of the tablet dedicated not one but three curses, we have an index of how desperate she was: not only how badly she hated Karpime Babbia, but also how stressful she found her impaired reproduction. The case of the author of the curse against Karpime Babbia was probably not isolated. As noted by Nasrallah (2012, 125-32), in the Corinth of the first century CE the mother-child relationship was fragile, and often caused anxiety and grief. The city where the murdered children of Medea were worshipped was experienced in how to cope with the fragility of infants through witchcraft. However, Graeco-Roman magic was not the only solution available. Stroud (2014, 201f.) asks whether the women performing official and non-official rituals in the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore were paying attention to Paul's message and preaching in the city.

Outside of Corinth, we can find more parallels for spells and oral prayers used in order to aid or impede reproduction. In a famous passage from a Platonic dialogue, Socrates alluded to the power of midwives (*maiai*), who were able to stimulate or lessen labor pains as well as to induce a miscarriage through drugs and incantations (Pl. *Tht.* 149c-d, see on this passage Leitao 2012, 237f.). In telling the story of Hercules' birth, Ovid recalls how the goddess of childbirth, Lucina—following Juno's orders—halted Alcmena's delivery, murmuring spells in a low voice (Ov. *Met.* 9.300f.). Oral incantations were believed to interfere with nature and the body. Galen fiercely criticized the use of similar sung charms for controlling female fertility and reproduction:

ἐγὼ τοίνυν οὔτε βασιλίσκων οὔτε ἐλεφάντων οὔθ' ἵππων Νειλώων οὔτ' ἄλλου
τινὸς οὐ μὴ πεῖραν αὐτὸς ἔχω μνημονεύσω, τῶν δὲ καλουμένων φίλτρων,
ἀγωγίμων, ὄνειροπομπῶν τε καὶ μισήτρων, αὐτοῖς γὰρ τοῖς ἐκείνων ὀνόμασιν
ἐξεπίτηδες χρῶμαι, τὴν ἀρχὴν ἂν, οὐδ' εἰ πεῖραν ἰκανὴν εἶχον, ἐμνημόνευσα διὰ
γραμμάτων, ὥσπερ οὐδὲ τῶν θανασίμων φαρμάκων ἢ τῶν ὡς αὐτοὶ καλοῦσιν
παθοποιῶν. ἐκεῖνα μὲν γὰρ αὐτῶν καὶ γελοῖα, καταδῆσαι τοὺς ἀντιδίκους, ὡς
μηδὲν ἐπὶ τοῦ δικανικοῦ δυνηθῆναι φθέγγασθαι, ἢ ἐκτρῶσαι ποιῆσαι τὴν
κύουσαν, ἢ μηδέποτε συλλαβεῖν, ὅσα τ' ἄλλα τοιαῦτα.

I will not recall the use of the basilisk nor of parts from the elephants or from the horses of the Upper Nile, nor from something else of which I do not have experience of the risks. Then, about those called philtres, those that attract, induce dreams, trigger hate—on purpose I surveyed their names, although I do not have a sufficient experience of them, I will mention the principles in the

treatise, as not lethal remedies or—as they say—remedies that cause bodily diseases. For some of these are even ridiculous, like those supposed to tie up the opposing litigant, so that he will not be able to speak in court, or provoke an abortion on a pregnant woman, or inhibit conception for ever, or do this and that. (Gal., *De simpl. medic. temp. ac fac.*, Kühn XII, 251-252).

In this passage, I am uncertain whether Galen is discussing the use of curses or of drugs (Kapparis 2002, 16, 19, 29, 77 translates φίλτρων as drugs). Although he is dealing with ingredients and recipes in the initial sentence of the paragraph, the primary meaning of φίλτρον is “charm, spell”, and Galen defines these charms with adjectives attested for incantations in the magical handbooks. In particular, ἀγώγιμος (“liable to seizure”), is the technical term for spells aimed at attracting a reluctant beloved person (see, for example, *PGM* 7.973). Ὀνειροπομπός (“charm sending dreams”) indicates a charm that induces dream-visions or gods and demons that speak in dreams (see, for example, *PGM* 4.2439). A μίσητρον, “charm producing hate”, is the opposite of an ἀγώγιμος φίλτρον, (“charm producing love”) and is a rare term equivalent to μίσηθρον, which has the same meaning and is attested only three times (Luc. *Dial. meret.* 4.5.1; Origen *C. Cels.* 7.69.15; *PGM* 3.164—here it is paired with a dream-sending spell and a διάκοπος (“spell that produces a breach”), a charm that separates two people, often a married couple). Galen continues, condemning the use of these spells in judicial litigations or within the medical sphere, such as in the case of a pregnancy, as, for example, the situation in which Karpime Babbia was attacked. In brief, it seems more plausible that here with φίλτρα Galen means curses and incantations rather than drugs.

3. Other Magical Procedures for Manipulating Reproduction

Alongside curses, another popular means for controlling fertility was inscribed amulets, written on small gold, silver, bronze, or copper lamellae, which were rolled up into capsules and hung around the neck. The chronology of these protective magical texts goes from the early first century BCE to the fifth/sixth century CE. Inscribed amulets were probably used together, or in competition with, herbal medicine and plant bioactives (Kotansky 1994, xviii). An example of a gold lamella, dating to the third/fourth century CE and found in a tomb in Nubia, used in a ritual for aiding conception is as follows:

Ἐλθέ πρός ἐμέ, Ἴσις, ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι Ὅσιρις ὁ ἄρρηγ, ἀδελφός <σ>ου. Ταῦτα τὰ ὕδατα ἃ προσφέρω, ὕδωρ ἔστι ἰέρακος, στηθυνίων Ἴβεως, ὕδωρ τοῦ Ἀνούβεως ἀδελφόν φθνηθ βεν. Κατὰ νῶτον εἶναι, ἄνοιξόν σου τὴν μήτραν, ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ καὶ ἐν <ταύ>τῃ τῇ ῥοπῇ καὶ ἄρπαξον τὸ σπαρὲν ἐν σοὶ ὕδωρ ἐν τῷ σου ὀνόματι, Ἴσι, ἄνασσα, βασίλισσα Τεντύρων, ἥδη, ταχὺ ταχὺ διὰ τὴν δύναμιν ὑμῶν ταχύ.

Come to me, Isis, because I am Osiris your male brother. These are the waters that I present to you: it is the water of the Falcon [Horus], (that) of the little breasts of Ibis, (and) the water of Anubis. Brother Phthnêth ben. Be on your back (and) open your womb in this hour, in this moment, and receive quickly the water seeded in you, in your name Isis, lady, queen of Denderah; now, quickly, quickly; through your power, quickly.

(Kotansky 1994, no. 61; Greek text in normalized spelling and partly modified English translation from Kotansky 1994, 362).

The text contains a mythical narrative that involves the figures of Isis and Osiris in order to ensure the opening of the womb and the reception of the semen. Isis, goddess of sexuality and fertility, represents the woman addressed in this spell, while Osiris, brother and husband of Isis, represents the man. The “waters” refer to the male seminal fluid (see Kotansky 1994, 365, with a reference to *PGM XII.234*). In particular, the waters of Anubis were a symbol of life, since he was the god who embalmed Osiris and then contributed to his resurrection. The injunction to open the womb may have implied a reference to fertility, and the expressions “in this hour, in this moment” may have indicated that the amulet had to be used during the sexual intercourse. It suggests that the woman was wearing the amulet and the man recited the incantation while they were having sex (Kotansky 1994, 367f.).

Magical handbooks offered recipes and incantations also for ending a pregnancy. Historically, there have been few changes in abortion techniques until the last century (Kapparis 2002, 31). In ancient Greek language, there was no perceived difference between a miscarriage and an abortion; the same term could have different meanings depending on the context, and could indicate a spontaneous or voluntary termination as well as the expulsion of a still fetus (see Pepe 2014, 3 with further references). Greek terminology includes, in particular, διαφθορά and φθορά (e.g. *IG II² 1365.22, 1366.7*; from φθείρω, to destroy), ἄμβλωμα (e.g. *Antiph. Soph. 148*) and ἄμβλωσις (Lys. Fr. 8; both from ἀμβλίσκω, to cause a miscarriage), and ἐκβόλιμον

(e.g. Arist. *Hist. an.* 575a.28, from ἐκβάλλω, to expel). Women themselves, midwives, practitioners with medical knowledge, or magicians could procure an abortion through a variety of procedures, some harmless and others dangerous or ineffective (Kapparis 2002, 11). The most accessible way was to swallow drugs and potions made from mixing herbs. These *pharmaka* could have lethal side effects for the mother (Kapparis 2002, 12-19; on recipes for abortifacients, see Hanson 1995b, 298-302; Totelin 2009, 214-19; on the debated evidence on the legal aspects of abortion in the ancient Greek world—especially Athens, see more recently Pepe 2014). Other methods included vaginal suppositories, creams to be applied on the abdomen, strenuous physical exertion or physical violence, and surgical operation for clearing the uterus by dilation and curettage (see Hippoc. *Mul.* 1.78 = 8.178.12-188.24 Littrè). Hippocratic writers condemned women using self-help for procuring an abortion, since it was very likely to cause serious lesions in the womb (Hippoc. *Mul.* 1.67 = 8.140 Littrè; 1.72 = 8.152.15-21 Littrè).

Beside these techniques, ritual means involving supernatural agents were also used. An example is preserved in the Greek magical papyri, where we find these instructions:

ἀνοιγήτω ἡ φύσις καὶ ἡ μήτρα τῆς δεῖνα, καὶ αἵμασσέσθω νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας.¹
καὶ τα[ῦτα γρ(άφων)] ἀρ[νείω] χρῶ αἵματι καὶ προδί[ω]κε τὰ [πα]ράθε[τα]
νυκτὸς γε[9] ιομ[.] πρωτη ἠδικησε, καὶ χῶσον παρὰ ῥοῦν ἢ παρὰ ..δα χα...ον
ἐν πιττακ[ιδί]ω.

Let the genitals and the womb of her, Ms-so-and-so, be open, and let her become bloody by night and day. And [these things must be written] with menstrual blood, and recite before nightfall, the offerings (?) ... she wronged first ... and bury it near a sumac, or near ... on a tablet (*PGM LXII* 76-106, following Aubert (1989) 430 n. 14, line 104: αἰσχρῶ αἵματι).

Aubert (1989, 429f.) suggests that the drawing of a semi-crescent might be interpreted as the representation of female genitals—and this charm was probably read with the intention of opening the womb of a woman, letting the menstrual flux, and perhaps the male seed, flow out of it. The text may be interpreted to be a cure for amenorrhea. However, the mention of some wrongdoing committed by the woman addressed in the charm seems to imply that the purpose was aggressive magic, probably for procuring an abortion (Aubert 1989, 434) or for provoking a constant and sickening menstrual flux. As in the case of the curse against Karpime Babbia, the

person that used this text seems to have been motivated by the wish to harm the reproductive function of another person, or more generally to damage a woman's health. Although we do not know with certainty the gender of the user of the spell, it is plausible to suppose that aggressor and victim were both female. Alternatively, a woman could have performed this spell on herself as a contraceptive method (Aubert 1989, 435).

More information about magical rituals for procuring an abortion can be read between the lines of a "confession inscription" from Asia Minor:

Μηνὶ Ἀρτεμιδώρου Ἀξιοτηνῶ

vacat of three lines

Συντύχη Θεογένου· εὐρόντος αὐ-

τῆς Θεογένου τοῦ ἀνδρὸς λιθάριον ὑα-

4 κίνθιον, εἶτα κειμένου αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ
αὐτῆς ἐκλάπη τὸ λιθάριον, καὶ ζητούσης
αὐτῆς καὶ βασανιζομένης ἐπέυξατο

μηνὶ Ἀξιοτηνῶ περὶ αὐτοῦ ἵνα αὐτὴν

8 ἱκανοποιήσι, καὶ εὐρέθη κατακεκαυμένον
καὶ ἠφανισμένον, ἐνδεμένον ἐν λινου-
δίῳ ὑπὸ τοῦ κλέπτου τεθειμένον ἐπὶ

τὸν τόπον, οὗ ἔκειτο ὀλόκληρον· οὕτως

12 τε ἐπιφανεῖς ὁ θεὸς ἐν μιᾷ καὶ τριακοσ-

τῇ τὴν κλέψασα<v> καὶ τοῦτο πυήσασα<v> Ἀφρίαν

Γλύκωνος οὗσαν παρθένον διέρηξε·

περι<σ>υρούσης τε αὐτῆς τὴν δύναμιν τοῦ

16 θεοῦ διὰ τὸ ἠρωτῆσθαι ὑπὸ τῆς μητρὸς
τῆς παρθένου, ἵνα σειγῆσι, καὶ ὁ θεὸς τοῦ-
το ἐνεμέσησε, ὅτι οὐκ ἐξεφάντευ-

σε οὐδὲ ὕψωσε τὸν θεὸν ἢ Συντύχη· διό-

20 τι ἐποίησεν αὐτὴν ἐπὶ τέκνου Ἡρακλεί-
δου ἐτῶν ἰγ' νέμεσιν ἐπὶ τὸν τόπον αὐτοῦ
στῆσαι, ὅτι τὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων μᾶλλον ἐπό-
ησεν ἢ τοῦ θεοῦ. v Συντύχη Ἀπολλωνίου

24 θυγάτηρ καὶ Μελτίνης ἢ προγεγραφοῦ-
σα τὴν νέμεσιν.

Syntyche, the wife of Theogenes, (made this dedication) to Men Artemidorou Axiottenos. Her husband Theogenes had found a hyacinth stone. Then (later) while the stone was kept in her house it was stolen. As she searched for it and was being interrogated over it, she prayed to Men Axiottenos to give her satisfaction about it. It was found burned and destroyed, wrapped up in a linen shirt and put back by the thief in the place where it had been kept when it was still undamaged. And so the god having appeared [i.e. shown his power] on the thirty-first day, deflowered Apphia, the daughter of Glykon, who was a virgin and who had stolen the stone and done this. And because she [i.e. Syntyche] completely concealed the power of the god, since the virgin's mother had asked her to keep silent, the god took revenge for this, because Syntyche had not publicized and exalted the god. Therefore he made her set up in his sanctuary this account of the revenge, at the time when he took on her child of thirteen years, Heraklides, because she acted in men's interest rather than in that of the god. It is Syntyche, the daughter of Apollonios and Meltine, who has brought to public knowledge the punishment. (Petzl 1994, no. 59; perhaps from the area of Kula, Lydia, Asia Minor, ca. 150–250 CE; partly modified English translation from Ogden 2009², 243).

The “confession inscriptions” from Lydia and Phrygia were inscribed on stone stelai erected in sanctuaries, and date from the first to the third century CE. There is an on-going discussion on how to label this group of documents: Chaniotis 2012 suggests using the either “records of divine justice” or “records of divine punishment”. This is because these texts attest the power of a god, who has punished someone for his or her sins. In each case, the writer has interpreted an experience of illness, death or any damage to his or her property as a divine punishment for known or unknown transgressions. Through the advice and the mediation of a priest, a dream, or an oracular response, the writer of the text determined the reason for this divine response, and, confessing his or her guilt publicly, exalted the power of the gods.

In this case, Syntyche dedicated the stele to the praise of the god Men Axiottenos, a local form of the lunar god. After the theft of a precious sapphire gem, she invoked divine help, probably using a prayer for justice. Syntyche prayed to the god to investigate the crime, recover the gemstone, and bring vengeance on the thieves. The god manifested his power and the gemstone was recovered, but it was found in a poor state, burnt and ruined. Syntyche did not reveal the great power of

Men, since her friend Glykon, the mother of the thief, a young girl called Apphia, asked her to keep the whole story quiet. Syntyche interpreted the death of her son as the punishment for having asked for divine help, but not then shown her gratitude in public. The marble stele is the result of the final confession.

Why would a young girl, Apphia, have been interested in stealing a gemstone, returning it burnt and damaged after thirty-one days? Apphia might have used the gemstone in a ritual aimed at solving a gynecological problem, most probably an unwanted pregnancy (Chaniotis 1990). This hypothesis is supported by comparison with other sources, where fumigations with burning stones stimulate the return of the menses. Handbooks on the properties of stones and gems explain that “if a woman exposes her body at its healing fumes letting them enter into her womb, quickly from it bleeds the black flow” (*Orph. Lith.* 485-91 on the lignite stone, Γαγάτης λίθος), and that “when the menstruations of women do not flow, you will grind this stone and you will put it on hot charcoals, then you will say to the woman to walk around it so that the womb will be fumigated with the smoke, and so she will be cleansed with no harm or pain” (Damig. XX additio 3, Halleux and Schamp 1985, 292). The method for purging the womb by fumigation seems to be less dangerous and painful than other techniques.

In addition, the use of linen cloth, as described in Apphia’s activities, is also compatible with the performance of a magical rite, as we know from the recipes and the instructions in the Greek magical papyri (Chaniotis 1990, 130, see *PGM* IV 675-676, 1081; VII 359-361; XII 96.313; XXXVI 235-236) and from the archaeological evidence. For example, a fourteen-week fetus found wrapped in a linen cloth and fastened with a cord was used in magical rites (Kellis, Egypt, late IV CE; Frankfurter 2006, 43). Apphia, then, may have performed a magical operation, waiting thirty-one days for her next period; but the rite did not work. At this point, she was forced to reveal the pregnancy and the theft. The statement that the god Men deflowered Apphia suggests that the idea of a divine epiphany was exploited in order to conceal a real love affair. It seems likely that the theft was planned by Glykon, the mother of the teenager and the friend of the stone’s original owner (cf. Ogden 2009², 244: Syntyche’s son, Heraklides, might be identified both as the father of the unwanted child and as the thief of the gemstone). The woman knew that her friend Syntyche owned the object, and she may have known how to procure an abortion with that stone. The two women may even have discussed how to perform an abortion,

weighing the options, sharing their knowledge, and co-operating. Perhaps, Glykon asked Syntyche to keep the incident silent in order to resort to another more powerful technique, so as to terminate the pregnancy before the news of the daughter's loss of virginity began spreading in the community. Self-medication would have been common especially in small cities such as this Lydian village, far away from the learned doctors of Athens or Alexandria (on the concentration of surgeries (ιατρεῖα) in big urban centers see Caliò 2009).

4. Magic in the Birthing Chamber: Amuletic Gems

Another healing technique for magical rituals as self-medication in the sphere of reproduction consisted in wearing or attaching to the body amulets of various materials. Resorting to amulets for controlling fertility and maternity was probably widespread in major cities as well as in small villages. If in contemporary society, we debate the extent of medical control over the birthing process, in the Graeco-Roman world, the question was whether or not to use magical amulets, as we can infer from Soranos of Ephesos (second century CE):

οὐκ ἀποκωλυτέον δὲ τὴν παράληψιν αὐτῶν· καὶ γὰρ εἰ μηδὲν ἐξ εὐθείας παρέχει τὸ περίσπτον, ἀλλ' οὖν δι' ἐλπίδος εὐθυμοτέραν τὴν κάμνουσαν τάχα παρέξει.

One must not forbid their use: if the amulet does not have any direct effect, at least giving hope it will soon make the patient more high-spirited. (Sor. *Gyn.* III 42)

Beside amulets inscribed on lamellae or tablets, Soranos probably had in mind another popular apotropaic means, that is gemstone amulets (on magical gems see, with further bibliography, Bonner 1950; Faraone 2011; Dasen 2007, 2011, 2014). Unfortunately, most of the gems now extant are of unknown provenance, since they come from the antiquarian market. But they were also objects of trade in antiquity, so even when we know of a stone's locality, it may not have been its original provenance. Gemstone amulets could have been used for promoting or preventing conception, for protecting a pregnancy, or for facilitating childbirth. We have Graeco-Egyptian engraved gemstones, which were worn in pendants, rings, or even orally administrated (a small part of the amulet ground and drunk with a liquid). The most common material for amulets used for controlling uterine functions was hematite, a

stone that was considered to have antihemorrhagic properties (Blakely 2006, 139-51 provides details on the power of stones and metals in rites of fertility).

Although the extant amulets are dated mainly to the Roman period, scholars think that similar amulets in more perishable materials were common also in the Classical and Hellenistic periods (Hanson 2004, 268; Faraone 2011). However, from the first century CE the engraving on gemstones became more complex, with long texts, syncretisms between Jewish, Egyptian, Roman, and Greek deities, and *voces magicae* (Bonner 1950, 5f.; Faraone 2011). A group of gemstones bears a recurring design that depicts a kind of round-shaped container with lines underneath, and sometimes divine figures above it, often accompanied by the inscription Ορῳριουθ (catalogued in Marino 2010). Scholars agree that this image represents the womb, together with the fallopian tubes and the sinews of the organ. The deities shown in these uterine gems are usually Egyptian and are gods who exercise control over reproduction, such as Isis, guardian of women, and Harpokrates, the divine infant.

The definition of Ορῳριουθ is debated, but it was perhaps a supernatural entity protecting generation and birth (Bonner 1950, 85f.; Faraone 2011, 56). Furthermore, the symbol of a key is frequently depicted under the vessel-organ: its function was to symbolically enact the opening the womb (promoting conception and birth) or the closing of the womb (aiding contraception and abortion). Perhaps the position of the key indicated the purpose of the amulet, whether it was engraved below the cervix or above the womb, and whether the key handle was pointing upwards or downwards (as in Michel 2004, no. 54.1b; other examples of opposite use of gemstones controlling blood flow in Faraone 2009, 221f.). Sometimes, a deity touches the key so as to indicate the divine power of governing uterine movements. In a red carnelian, Harpokrates' hand is in control of the key (Bonner 1950, no. 141). Another amulet shows an oval pot with a corrugated texture that vividly resembles the look of bodily tissues (Bonner 1950, no. 136). Another amulet, in red jasper, was probably used to encourage rapid birth, since the inscription ἐπὶ ποδία, “onto your little feet”, can be read as an order to the child in the womb: he or she had to find the way to come into the world and walk on his/her feet independently from the mother (Bonner 1950, no. 134, translated by Hansen 2004).

The properties of these amulets may have been known not only by professional magicians and physicians, but also more generally. Patients' autonomy in the use of amulets seems to be confirmed by a Mesopotamian parallel. A late

Babylonian tablet preserves rituals for a woman who is able to conceive, but who has faced the disappointment of recurrent miscarriages: “You thread copper beads, lapis, masculine lonestone, magnetic hematite, and ...-stone on red (wool). You wind three burls of red-dyed wool. You put (it) on her right hand. (...) Make the woman escape the punishments which the caster and castress, the sorcerer and sorceress imposed; cancel (them). May she raise the infants among her male children. (...) But I am pregnant and then I do not bring to term what is in my womb.” (*SpTU* no. 248, Uruk, fourth century BCE, extract from lines 1-5, rev. 3-11, rev. 19-25 translated by Scurlock 2002; on this document see also Couto-Ferreira 2013).

This long text, here only briefly quoted, seems to describe three different but complementary rituals. Without analyzing this document in full detail, three points are especially of interest in comparison with the Greek material. Firstly, a crucial part of the ritual was the production of protective amulets and the use of hematite, a stone whose antihemorrhagic properties were also valued, as we have seen, in the Graeco-Roman world. Secondly, the inability to give birth to a child is attributed to the magical action of an aggressor, a malign force that reminds us of the spell cast against Karpime Babbia. Thirdly, although the woman was not alone in performing the rituals, she seems to be the main agent of the ritual performance. She had an active role in the healing process.

5. Knowing the Body, Knowing the Formula: Concluding Remarks

It is time to draw some conclusions. As scholars agree and sources clearly show, through ritual activities the uterus could be “opened” and “closed” in order to assist or to prevent the performance of its natural functions. The perils around reproduction were contained by the possibility of magically controlling it. The epigraphic texts selected here give us a glimpse of the knowledge possessed by some ancient Greek women about reproductive rituals, which can be defined as rites of a religious or magical nature aimed at solving problems around conception, miscarriage, abortion, and childbirth.

It is difficult, however, to infer unitary conclusions from this material, given that some documents, such as the confession inscriptions, are expressions of a specific time and space, while others—such as the curse tablets and the gemstones—are chronologically and geographically widespread. However, the collected evidence does seem to suggest that women knew how to exploit magical tools and religious

worship in order to impede or facilitate reproduction. From these texts it can be imagined how women could have practiced these rituals, with or without help from male practitioners, doctors, or midwives. In response to the question asked at the beginning of this paper about the relationship between medical writings and epigraphy, we can observe that, if in the male-authored medical writings the men are those who “plant the seed” and “control the generation of children” (King 1998, 156), these inscriptions in contrast reveal women actively engaged in the manipulation of the birthing process. One might object that magical texts were written by professional magicians, and therefore they do not reflect the personal voice of their clients. However, each single document and its context may present unique elements or specific characteristics that allow us to trace the experience of the ritual agents beyond the formulae of magical handbooks.

It is important to underline that this ritual knowledge was not limited to women. None of these ritual practices was gender-specific, that is, exclusively performed by women or men. Therefore, it would be misleading to label these ritual activities as traditional female-only remedies. However, these documents attest certain gestures, incantations, procedures, and substances that were used by ancient Greek women in the management of gynecological problems. These ritual techniques were probably orally transmitted from mother to daughter or from friend to neighbor, and were therapies that some women could use independently from men. The selected inscriptions suggest that this kind of knowledge was probably accessible to a large number of women, rather than being limited to “women of experience” or midwives (on these see Hanson 1994; Dean-Jones 1995; King 2013, 180-186). Curse tablets might be deposited during the festival of Demeter and Kore, amulets—made of materials more or less expensive—were a popular purchase, and household objects—such as Sythyche’s stone—could be turned into ritual ingredients.

That women managed fertility is not a novelty. What is worth noting is the fact that knowledge of the interaction between magic, ritual, and reproduction provided women with a powerful tool for asserting their influence in society (cf. Stears 1998, 94 on the power exercised by women expert in funerary rituals). Ritual knowledge meant that women could try to exert their will over the natural processes of generation, and in this way they could define their cultural identity as mothers or as independent individuals. From these documents emerges the scale of female agency in the sphere of ritual and society. For example, women casting abortifacient spells

were trying to affirm their power and to intervene in the shaping of social relationships. One of the most important social functions—the production of offspring—seems to be managed by women with a good degree of autonomy. The equation between women and fertility might wrongly reflect an image of femininity reduced to motherhood. On the contrary, ritual expertise enhanced the position of women in the community, considering that the performance of the rite itself was deemed sufficient for obtaining a desired result. Women could participate in healing and aggressive rites around the womb, and this competence may have given them the possibility to state their point of view influentially, and take decisive action in difficult situations.

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