

Zeus' Proxy Womb: Soranus' *Gynecology* and the Birth of Dionysus

This project demonstrates how examining the mythic and medical corpuses in tandem enriches our understanding of ancient medical practice. The tendency of historical accounts of medicine to emphasize the takeover of the “Greek miracle”, commonly seen as the introduction of rationalized forms of dealing with disease, has been supplanted by scholars such as V. Nutton (2012), who rightly points out that the tendency to label certain types of medicine as rational/irrational only simplifies the reality and covers up the diversity of institutions open to those persons operating or seeking treatment in the medical sphere of antiquity. That said, the gynecological corpus has been classified as inferior to other medical texts because it is thought to have more ‘folk medicine’ and less ‘real science’ than other medical documents (Dean-Jones, 1994). My project, instead, gives emphasis to one remnant of such ‘inferior’ medicine in Soranus’ *Gynecology* and demonstrates that reading the ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ alongside each other is much more revealing than isolating them in their own spheres.

In the *Gynecology*, Soranus lays out the proper aftercare of a cut umbilical cord, recommending to bend the cord in on itself, wrap it in wool, and place it gently on the *omphalos*. However, in the same literary breath he drops an allusion to a different method: “Now of the navel cord left behind, some have attached the ligated part to the thigh” (2.8.13, trans. Temkin). While this is all that Soranus himself has to say on this practice, my paper explores the underlying mythic elements to answer: Why the thigh?

To those familiar with Greco-Roman myth, this practice has a clear resonance with the story of Dionysus’ birth. When Zeus couples with mortal Semele in his true form, she is obliterated by his divine power, but fetal-Dionysus is salvaged and sewn into Zeus’ thigh, a

proxy-womb, from which he is later born. Through this medico-mythic intersection, I intend to demonstrate that Soranus' passing comment in regard to umbilical cord practice can be unpacked and connected to greater ideas about the boundaries of the body, the vulnerability of the area around the thigh, and its connotations within Greco-Roman cultural thought.

In mythology, thigh wounding is a common trope of heroes, either crucial to their identity in life, or the gateway to their death. Ritual leg marking and wounding signal the passage from boyhood to manhood (Bremmer, 2021), and the fact that people were purposely wounding such a vital area speaks the gravity of both the ritual, but also pubescent transition. To utilize elements of myth and religion and to reckon them alongside a similar transition in life—the period from birth into early infancy—helps bring about a clearer picture about the role of blood and explain the practice of caring for the umbilical cord.

Theoretically, embryonic Dionysus, called *imperfectus infans* by Ovid (*Met.* 3.310), would need a proper source of blood to finish his gestation and come to full term once implanted in Zeus' thigh. Ancient medical theories regarding the veins in the thigh (e.g., Aristotle, *HA* 512a) and ideas about the nourishment of the fetus reveal the supporting role of menstrual blood and the umbilical vessels. By the time of Galen, this shifts to the concrete understanding about the necessary relationship between the mother's blood and the umbilical cord for fetal nourishment. Medically speaking, fetal-Dionysus, transplanted to Zeus' thigh, would require the sanguine nourishment required during gestation in order to achieve a healthy birth. Zeus' thigh would theoretically contain a large enough vein for this purpose and perhaps this concept underlies the 'alternative' umbilical cord practice mentioned in Soranus. A parallel certainly exists between the tenuous situation in which Dionysus was believed to have come to full term in the safety of Zeus' thigh and the circumstances under which one hoped their newborn would

survive into infancy. Placing an infant's cut umbilical cord in the thigh is a tempting connection for a sympathetic relationship between nourishment by blood while the umbilical wound heals, a practice sustained by the myth of Dionysus' birth. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates how probing an 'irrational' medical practice and assessing it through a comprehensive approach reveals how myth, ritual, and medicine understand, construct, and pathologize the body in ways that reflect and reinforce each other.

Selected Works

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