

Articoli/Articles

ABOUT A MEDICAL AMULET IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL
MUSEUM IN FLORENCE

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SUMMARY

A MEDICAL AMULET IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM IN FLORENCE

In the Archaeological Museum in Florence there is a medical amulet, which is made of haematite and shows the reproduction of the womb, with four divinities and inscriptions, which can be considered a peculiar evidence of anatomical knowledge of the past.

The custom of integrating resources of Medicine with magic-religious expedients, in order to make up for inevitable lacks of science dates back to very ancient times.

Amulets, which were used for this purpose, can be found in every culture of the past, even if they differentiate in a great typological and ichnographical variety.

Parts of human body, where the amulet's magic power was expected to show its effectiveness, were very often represented and they can really be considered an important source to reconstruct anatomo-physiological theories of the Ancients.

A very interesting case concerns figures of the womb, which bear apothropaical inscriptions, which are very difficult to explain because they are very probably late linguistic elaborations, whose original meaning was not understood any more, but which were believed to be particularly effective, owing even to this incomprehensibility.

A significant example of this kind of engravings is kept in the Sala delle Gemme in the Archaeological Museum in Florence:

Parole chiave/Key words: Medical Amulets - Ancient Gynaecology - History of Medicine

this amulet can be typologically included in this casuistry; it is made of haematite², which is the almost exclusive material of this kind of engravings and it shows a relatively usual iconographic and epigraphic repertory.

SIDE A:

Ouroboros which enclaves the womb, which is overhung by four staying gods - in profile -, insisting on two short wavy lines, which can be interpreted as the schematic representation of Falloppio's tubae: Nephtys and Anubis in the form of a mummy - in succession- on the left; Osiris - in the form of a mummy - and Nephtys- in succession - on the right, specular to other ones.

This latest goddess gives rise to some explanatory perplexities, because a statistical analysis of divinities on this kind of engravings shows a greater number of the coupling Nephtys-Isis, than a double presence of Nephtys, but the lack of Isis peculiar attributes does not permit her identification⁴.

Under the womb, there is a key with seven teeth, which is the most regular case, as it suggests, with this number, clear allusions to the Egyptian world, where the number seven was considered sacred and it was associated to delivery's divinities with "Seven Hathors".

Round the Ouroboros runs an inscription, which is seriously compromised, but which can be reconstructed in the usual formula, reading as follows:

ΣΟΡΟΟΡΜΕΡΦ [ΕΡΓΑ] ΡΒΑΡΜΑ [ΦΡΙΟΥΡΙΓΕ]

Inside, some scattered letters:

SIDE B:

Ο Ρ ω Ρ
Ι Ο Υ Θ

From a typological point of view, the womb is represented with the classic form of "bowl-shaped vessel", which has been, for a long time, the greatest interpretative difficulty of these amulets⁵.



SIDE A



SIDE B

Anatomical details are clearly evident with Falloppio's tubae, upon which four divinities insist, and ligaments of organ itself.

Coupling of divinities, as we have already said, is relatively original, in comparison with general casuistry: a key with seven teeth constantly occurs on these amulets, even if with a different number of teeth: keys and locks had great importance, because they were done of metal, a material which was believed to be provided with magical effects and because of eschatological references: lying - in women kept in hand a key, in order to "open the womb".

Aristophanes calls Hera the keeper of wedding keys (Thesm. 976): *κλήδας γάμου φυλάττει*
Pindar hands on that Peitho owns the secret key of love (Pyth. IX, 39)

Cultural ambit of this engraving can be deduced from the combination of these data: many amulets of this kind have been found in Egypt and bear egyptian symbols and divinities, but their ideal matrix must be led to a graeco-egyptian cultural contamination, as it happened through alexandrinian civilization.

The representation of the womb itself is probative: contrary to common opinion, as a matter of fact, anatomical knowledges of Egyptians were not always very precise and physiology of female genital apparatus was based on inaccurate anatomical data, which were not supported by adequate autoptical experiences: medical papyri show that Egyptian considered the womb in direct connection with other organs⁶: the "bowl-shaped vessel" representation is the result of later scientific elements, which must be linked with the milieu of Alexandria.

Even the workmanship of the engraving itself seems to allude to alexandrinian milieu: the amulet seems to be datable to the fourth century A.D., but a precise chronological placement is not possible, because of the wide geographical and temporal diffusion of these amulets, without particular typological changes.

The exemplar of Florence Collections must be placed in this stream, but it represents a very precious case, because of its iconographical complexity and because of the richness of detail.

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NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

¹ Sala delle Gemme, Box G, drawer 38, tray 26; serial number 64. Haematite; diam. cm. 3 approx. I am very grateful to Dr. Luigi Tondo who has permitted the publication and to Dr. Franca M. Vanni, for her collaboration. From a verification on the eighteenth century text of florentine Gori (GORI A. F., *Thesaurus gemmarum antiquarum astriferarum, quae e compluribus dactylotheis selectae aereis tabulis CC insculptae observationibus inlustrantur*, Florentiae (1750, vol. III) this amulet is not reproduced. It can be considered a "terminus post quem" for the immission of this engraving in the Florentine Collection.

² WALLIS BUDGE E. A., *Amulets and Talismans*, New York 1961.

³ It is not very clear: it could be Duamutef, too.

⁴ Problems connected with this kind of gems are summarized in BONNER C., *Studies in magical amulets- chiefly graeco-egyptian*. Ann Arbor, The Univ. of Michigan, 1950 (abbr. SMA). Most recent bibliography is in MANDRIOLI BIZZARRI A. R., *La collezione delle Gemme del Museo Civico Archeologico di Bologna*, Bologna 1987, n. 271.

⁵ Ouroboros is the name of the snake which bites its tail, symbol of eternity. The first formula cannot be translated.

OPΩPIOUΘ, perhaps from Hebrew (?): "light of lights". It is the womb's dominator. See PGM, IV, 1566 and 1567; XII, 173 (*Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri herausgegeben und übersetzt von Karl Preisendanz*, 2 voll. Leipzig 1928).

⁶ LIPPI D., *Aegyptische Gynaekologie*, Acts of the XXIX. th Int. Cong. Hist. Med., Cairo 1984-1985, p. 63-67.

⁷ For comparisons, see BONNER, *op. cit.*, nr. 131 and *Catalogue of the Collection of Antique Gems formed by James Ninth Earl of Southesk. K. T.* Edited by Lady Elena Carnegie, Vol. 1, London 1908.

Articoli/Articles

SPUNTI DI PEDIATRIA IN RUFO D'EFESO

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SUMMARY

PEDIATRIC MENTIONS IN RUFUS FROM EPHEBUS

In the horizons of ancient medicine Rufus from Ephesus seems a learned and experienced doctor in every branch of his profession. He was particularly interested in children's breeding and in their illnesses. For this reason it is very important to gather and comment the passages survived where the subjects on childhood are treated.

"I bambini non debbono essere curati come gli adulti, ma, in qualsiasi tipo di malattia, debbono essere trattati con maggiore moderazione"¹. Questa frase di Cornelio Celso segna, secondo Giuseppe Penso², la nascita della pediatria come scienza a sé nel mondo greco-romano.

Non per questo troviamo, né negli scritti di Celso né in quelli di altri autori, una separazione netta tra patologia infantile e patologia degli adulti: non esistevano allora a Roma, né in tutto l'impero romano, "specialisti" in pediatria, ma la cura dei neonati era affidata alle ostetriche, quella dei bambini a medici generici.

Non vi erano neppure trattati che si limitassero a trattare delle malattie dell'infanzia, né testi di puericoltura o di pediatria. Gli autori si limitavano a dire che alcune malattie colpivano in preferenza i bambini e a riconoscere, come fa Celso, che il loro trattamento doveva essere particolare.

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