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Sowing Children.

Interpreting the morphology of votive wombs

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ABSTRACT

Sowing Children. Interpreting the morphology of votive wombs

The interpretation of the iconography of the body must necessarily be placed in the historical and anthropological coordinates to which the image belongs. The conceptualization of the body and its physiology changes through the centuries and from one cultural context to another. The paper therefore proposes an interpretation of the characteristics of the furrowed votive uterus consistent with the main embryogenetic theories of the Greek and Roman world.

Keywords: Embryogenetic Theories - Votive Wombs - Conceptualization of Body - Ancient Western Medicine

The correct interpretation of the iconographic language implies its precise contextualization within the anthropological and cultural coordinates to which the image belongs. This principle, apparently obvious, must also and especially be applied when the image concerns the body. If it is true that the body always appears the same, its conceptualization changes over the centuries^{1,2}. The history of medicine often reflects on physiological and pathophysiological models that are very distant from those acquired thanks to our consolidated possibilities of scrutinizing the nature of man in ever more remote depths. This is why the investigation of the representation of the body must necessarily dialogue with all the sources chronologically and culturally homogeneous to the image. The case of the anatomical votives is particularly emblematic³. These are plastic representations of parts of the body, preserved in healing sanctuaries, for which healing from the god is requested or obtained. The votive wombs sometimes have a bulge on the right: those of Paestum, in particular, linked to the cult of Hera as a dispenser of fertility, have been associated by Ebner⁴ with Parmenides' embryogenetic beliefs on the conception of males on the right side and females on the left side of the uterus: the morphology of the votive anatomical should therefore be understood as a prayer to conceive a male. It is perhaps possible to recognize in the artifact the influence of the embryological theories of the medical school of Elea-Velia.

The same criterion can guide us in the interpretation of the grooves that characterize one of the main types of votive uterus identified by Comella⁵: the furrowed uterus. The Attic marriage formula, which establishes a real contract in the passage of the woman from the guardianship of the father to that of the husband, associates the conjugal bond with the ploughing of legitimate children⁶. The Greek term *arotos* (plowing) expresses a metaphorical image of the female body that links the procreative function to cultivation: the woman is the field to be ploughed, the man the plough that digs the earth to sow the generative seed^{7,8}. The Attic formula is consistent with the biological belief that only the male produces the fertilizing sperm, while the woman offers the container for gestation⁹. Moreover, when Ismene points out to Creon that he is killing his son's bride, the tyrant replies that Haemon will find other furrows to sow¹⁰. Plutarch's perspective is different: in the *Advice to Bride and Groom*^{11,12}, after listing the three ploughing sacred to the Athenians, he recognizes the marriage ploughing as the most sacred of all. In fact, Plutarch would seem to align himself with the Hippocratic treatise *On the Nature of the Child*¹³, which ascribes to both man and woman the ability to produce a seed and which completes the metaphor by describing embryogenesis in terms of plant germination^{14,15}: husband and wife, in fact, are equally invited not to sow where they would be ashamed of the harvest to the point of having to hide it. The metaphorical image goes as far as the most common remedy of unwanted birth, that is, exposure. This documentary background, therefore, allows us to attribute a meaning to the grooves present on the votive wombs: they could represent the furrows of ploughing. After all, Plato¹⁶ in the *Timaeus* also represents the effect of the generative instinct of sexual union as the insemination of the ploughed matrix.



Fig. 1. Roman Votive Uterus and breast, I- II century AD, Museum of the History of Medicine, Sapienza University of Rome



Fig. 2 Roman Votive Uterus, I- II century AD, Museum of the History of Medicine, Sapienza University of Rome

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