



STATE OF THE ART

Herodotus and Hippocrates: two paradigms in interpreting castration among the Scythians¹

Maria do Sameiro Barroso

Portuguese Medical Association: Department of History of Medicine, Lisbon, Portugal

University of Coimbra, Research Centre for Anthropology and Health, Department of Life Sciences, Calçada Martim de Freitas, 3000-456 Coimbra, Portugal

Centre for History, Faculty of Letters, University of Lisbon

Corresponding author: msameirobarroso@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on different interpretations of castration among the Scythians, apprehended in distinct frameworks of religious beliefs and medical knowledge by Herodotus (5th century BC) and Hippocrates (460-370 BC). The complex rituals of Oriental castration are briefly overviewed along with the history of equestrianism, mastered by the Scythians, introducing the use of riding pants and saddles. The religious beliefs conveyed by Herodotus presenting a concept of disease as divine punishment is correctly replaced by accurate observation of the effects of overriding by the nomad tribes of the steppes, provoking various conditions of male sexual organs, including impotence.

¹ English revised and augmented translation of the article *A castração entre os citas: Heródoto e Hipócrates, dois paradigmas de interpretação*, "Medicina na Beira Interior – Cadernos de Cultura Medicina na Beira Interior, da Pré-História ao Século XXI", n. 9 XXVII., pp. 103-106.

Hippocrates view stands as a shift of paradigm carried out by Hippocratic medicine, replacing magic-religious concepts of disease by natural causes viewed by accurate clinical observation and correct pathophysiological interpretation.

Keywords: Social History of Medicine, History of sexuality, Herodotus, Hippocrates, Ancient Greek Mythology.

RESUMO

Este ensaio foca interpretações diferentes da castração entre os citas em áreas distintas envolvendo crenças religiosas de Heródoto (século V a. C.) e conhecimentos médicos de Hipócrates (460-370 a. C.). Os complexos rituais de castração orientais são brevemente resumidos, juntamente com a história da hipologia, dominada pelos citas que introduziram o uso de calças e selas. As crenças religiosas transmitidas por Heródoto, apresentando um conceito de doença como castigo divino, são correctamente substituídas pela observação precisa dos efeitos de montar a cavalo por períodos demasiado longos pelas tribos nómadas das estepes, provocando várias afecções dos órgãos sexuais masculinos, incluindo a impotência. A visão de Hipócrates surge como uma mudança de paradigma realizada pela medicina hipocrática, substituindo os conceitos mágicos religiosos da doença por causas naturais, baseada numa observação clínica precisa e numa interpretação fisiopatológica correcta.

Palavras-chave: História Social da Medicina, História da sexualidade, Heródoto, Hipócrates, Mitologia Grega Antiga.

Herodotus (5th century BC) referred to the oldest temple of Aphrodite Urania in the Syrian city of Ascalon, in the following terms:

“They withdraw by way of Ascalon in Syria. The bulk of the army passed the town without doing any damage, but a small number of men got left behind and robbed the temple of Aphrodite Urania – the most ancient, I’m told, of all the temples of this goddess. The one in

Cyprus, the Cyprians themselves admit was derived from it, but the one in Cythera was built by the Phoenicians, who belong to this part of Syria. The Scythians who robbed the temple at Ascalon were punished with the infliction of what is called the ‘female disease’, and their descendants still suffer from it. This is the reason the Scythians give for this mysterious complaint, and travellers to the country can see what it is like, The

Scythians call those who suffer from it 'Enarees'." ([Sélincourt, 1972: 84](#))

In this excerpt, Herodotus refers to the cult of Aphrodite whose history began in Sumer, Assyria, Babylon and Phoenicia in the Mediterranean, from 5,000 BC with the Goddess Inana, wife of the Shepherd God Dumuzi, Queen of the Sky and Goddess of the Night and the Morning Star. She is a Goddess of vegetation and fertility *par excellence*. In Sumerian cities and temples, she lived together with the not less prominent Mother Goddess Ninhursag, who was the generator of life, Inanna as the goddess of the maintenance of life ([Grigson, 1987](#)).

The cult of these goddesses underlies the cult of an earlier goddess, Great Goddess, Meter, goddess of life, mother of all gods and all men and animals. The Anatolian Mother Goddess had arisen as the goddess Cybele, the Phrygian goddess. Her worship was manifestly private, being supported and disseminated by begging priests, 'metragýrtai', of Phrygian origin, who called themselves 'Kýbeboi' ([Burkert, 1993](#)).

The castration of the priests of Cybele, the Galoi, was part of the rituals of the Goddess cult, in Pessino, an ancient Hittite-Phrygian region ([Burkert, 1993](#)). At the top of the hierarchy of this mystical cult, made up of sacred eunuchs, was a high priest called Attis. A black meteorite was the sacred stone around which the centre of devotion to the Goddess was established ([Kluft, 2003](#)). The castration ritual was not well regarded by the Greeks, who did not officiate the worship of the goddess.

The characteristics of Aphrodite, in Greece, are narrated by the poet Hesiod who lived

between 750 to 650 BC; in Theogony, he recounts that Aphrodite was born from the white foam wrapping the immortal flesh (the sexual organs of Uranus), the sky, husband of Gaia, the Earth, cut by his son Cronos with a scythe when he hugged her. The mutilation was not in vain, says Hesiod, because the Earth received all the drops of blood. The genitals, cut and thrown into the stormy sea, were carried by the waves. From them, a girl was born, first landing in the sacred island of Kythera, and proceeded to Cyprus, surrounded by the waves. There, the land turned green as she passed, when it touched it with her delicate feet. Among men and gods, her name was Aphrodite because she was born from the foam of the sea. Eros was her companion. Desire followed her closely from the beginning immediately after joining the gods. Aphrodite was the one that smiled, sweet loving and full of charm (Hesiod, Teog. in [Mair, 1908](#)).

It is worth noting that Aphrodite was born from male sexual organs in the sea, female medium *par excellence* and that castration has become the act of male fertilization, carried out to conceive a Goddess, whose element of female generation is at the elemental and cosmic level. In addition to the mythical-religious level, Herodotus' text explains an illness, frequent among the Scythians, impotence. Divine punishment was one of the most frequent explanations for the origin of diseases in ancient proto-medicines. At the beginning of the Iliad, we came across the armies, devastated by the plague, sent by Apollo.

Indeed, Hippocrates (460-370 BC) referred to the prevalence of sexual impotence among the Scythians and other nomadic peoples that

he attributed to the excessive activity of riding horses. The Scythians tried to treat the health problem with cauterizations on the shoulders, arms, chest, hips and lower back to strengthen the muscles. When the treatment failed, they took for themselves the female work, acting like women. They were called 'effeminate'. The indigenous people attributed the cause of this affection to the deity they venerated, the goddess Cybele.

Next, Hippocrates states that all diseases have a divine origin, that there are no more divine or more human diseases, all being similar and divine. Moreover, shifting to a different point of view, he clarifies that all diseases have a natural cause and that, without a natural cause, nothing comes up. Furthermore, he starts to express his opinion, conveying the result of his careful observation of the Scythians' habits of life.

Hippocrates reported the cause of impotence among them was because they spent their lives on horseback, which causes joint inflammation, as they are always with their feet dangling along with the horse. Those that are most severely affected get lameness. In addition to the factors that cause impotence, it adds chronic fatigue, caused by excessive physical exercise and the use of pants (Hippocrates, Aër. 22 in [Littre, 1840](#)).

Aristotle (384-322 BC), in the work Ethics, Nicomanus also referred to what he called a hereditary disease that affected the Scythian kings who became effeminate (Aristotle 1150b 12-16 in [Irwin, 1999](#)). In our view, the interpretation of Hippocrates lists, in a very accurate and precise way, the health problems caused by the excess of physical exercise, the lack of rest and the consequences of overriding.

The first attempts to domesticate horses date back to the 4th millennium BC. It is not clear whether the horse began to be mounted immediately by the nomadic tribes of Central Asia since riding wild horses is not an easy job ([Sevestre and Rosier, 1983](#)). Images from the 2nd millennium a. C. of horses harnessed to agricultural cars, carrying goods or war arrays, appear in Turkey, Assyria and Egypt ([Clutton-Brock, 1992](#)). The practice of riding a horse became widespread around 1,000 BC. Bridles were the first equipment of horses. The use of blankets preceded the saddle ([Clutton-Brock, 1992](#)).

In terms of the history of equestrianism, the Scythians occupy a prominent place in the art of riding. They were nomadic people, originally from the steppes of Eurasia, speaking an Iranian language. Little is known about them since they had no writing. They spent most of their lives on horseback and kept moving almost always, taking their herds of horses with them. In the 8th century BC, they migrated to the steppes to the North of the Black Sea, proceeded until Asia Minor, arriving at the Greek borders. They settled down and established cultural and commercial exchange with the Greeks. The Scythians were the first to manufacture saddles. They created a double leather cushion, about 60 cm long, slightly elevated at the rear, firmly fixed with the mane around the horse's flanks and abdomen. Although it was not a quite firm saddle, it somehow guaranteed stability, comfort and safety to the rider. There are indications that they used a leather tie, attached to the saddle, which would serve as a footrest, functioning as a stirrup. However, this invention is usually

attributed to the Huns in the 4th century AD ([Dossenbach and Dossenbach, 1987](#)).

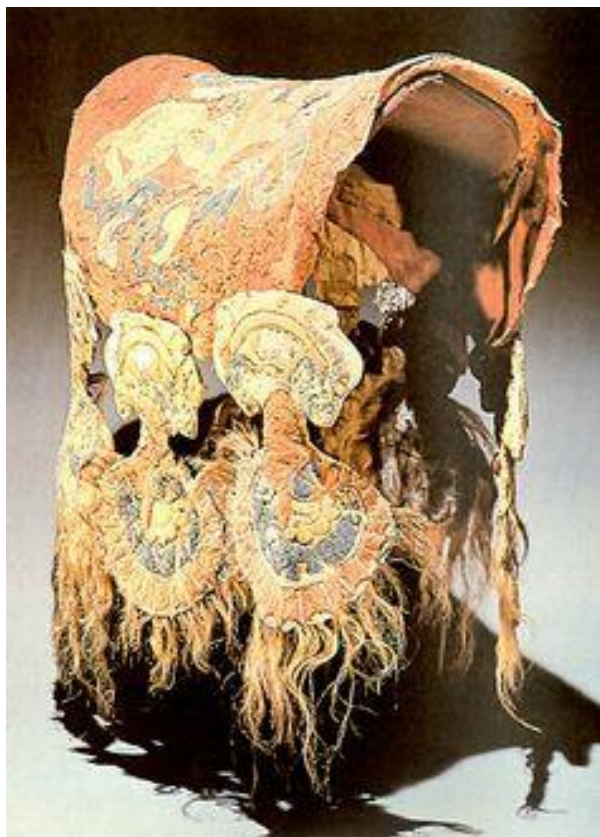


Figure 1 - Scythian saddle blanket. Altai, 4th BC.

Although they managed to craft some protection, conferred by the use of the saddle and the ties that acted as stirrups, given the life they led, almost permanently on horseback, they would be easily subject to trauma, inflammation and infections of the sexual organs and perineum. Due to friction and increased temperature (sperm do not survive temperatures above 36 °C.) the function of the testicles, sperm producers and male sex hormone secretors, would also be affected.

In the Eurasian steppe, pants were a fundamental part of men's clothing. Possibly

firstly devised by inhabitants of the northern sub-Artic regions, pants represented skills for knights and, therefore, their use was spread so widely that they became normal for Scythians and, among others, for Iranian knights who settled in the Persian Empire ([Pêgo, 1993](#)).

The use of pants, contrary to what Hippocrates thought, would be beneficial, as it would give more protection to the perineum, the sexual organs and the lower limbs, and would facilitate the adhesion between the horse and the rider.

The Scythian saddles do not seem to have reached the Greeks who, being sedentary peoples, rode with bare legs on horseback. Xenophon (c. 430 -355 BC), who wrote the first treatise on equitation that came up to us, refers to seat cloths. As for the equipment of the knight, he just refers to high leather boots (Xenophon, in Morgan, 1962). The riders rode with their legs dangling along the horse's flanks.

The seat cloths were blankets, not the Scythian saddles. There is also no ancient word, Greek or Latin, to designate the metal stirrups that emerged in Europe at the beginning of the 8th century AD ([Clutton-Brock, 1992](#)).

Jacques Jouanna discussed this text in the scope of the rationalization of the divine, operated by Hippocratic thought, having compared the texts of Herodotus and Hippocrates and attributed the disease to the higher classes of the Scythians because only these had horses and could afford to ride ([Jouanna, 1999](#)).



Figure 2 – Marble plate depicting a Greek knight. National Museum of Athens. Photo credit: Ivo Miguel Barroso.

The most important fact that stands out when we read the two texts by Herodotus and Hippocrates are the two perspectives marking the evolution of Greek thought. In what concerned the origin of diseases, the Greek thought shifted carefully and decidedly to the rational level of observation and interpretation. It should be noted that Hippocrates begins by not intending to contradict the religious explanation, but his rational approach ended up pervading, correctly interpreting the pathophysiological origin of mechanism of castration.

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