



WOMEN IN MEDICINE IN THE GRAECO- ROMAN PERIOD

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Outline of the lecture

Sources

Constructs of the female body in antiquity

The Hippocratic woman and her treatment

The Soranic woman and her treatment

Women healers



Sources

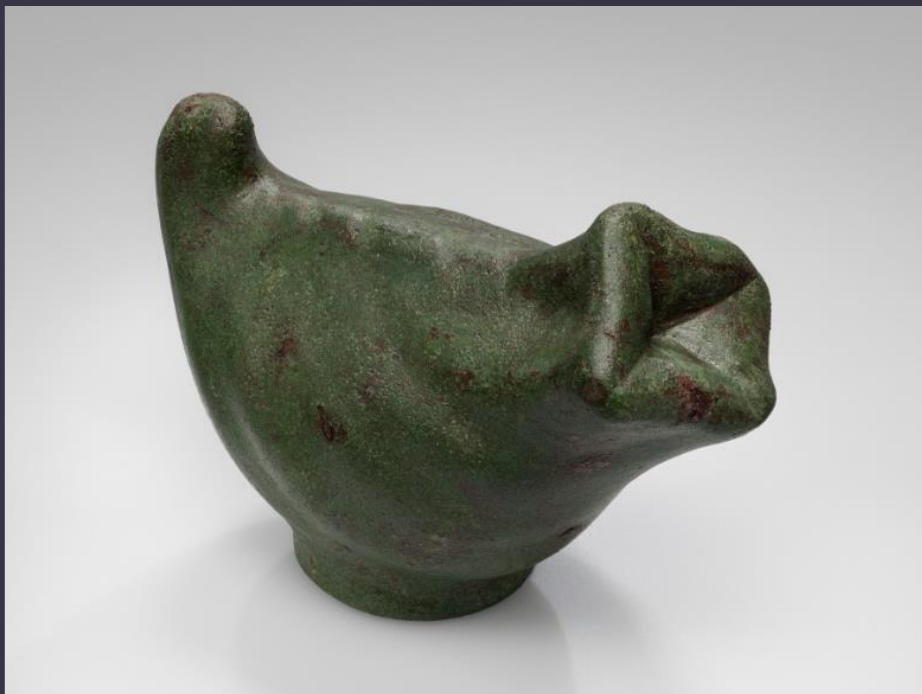
- Medical texts
- Inscriptions in honour of midwives or female doctors
- Dedications from women at healing sanctuaries
- Some surgical instruments
- Amulets



Medical Sources

- Texts of the Hippocratic Corpus: *Diseases of Women I*; *Diseases of Women II*; *Barren Women*; *Nature of Women*; *Superfetation*; *Diseases of Young Girls* and other shorter texts; Gynaecological sections in *Epidemics*; *Aphorisms*
- Embryological treatises
- Aristotle: the 'biological' works
- Herophilus, *Midwifery* (lost)
- Soranus, *Gynaecology*
- Galen: sections in various works
- Works by women? Cleopatra and Metrodora



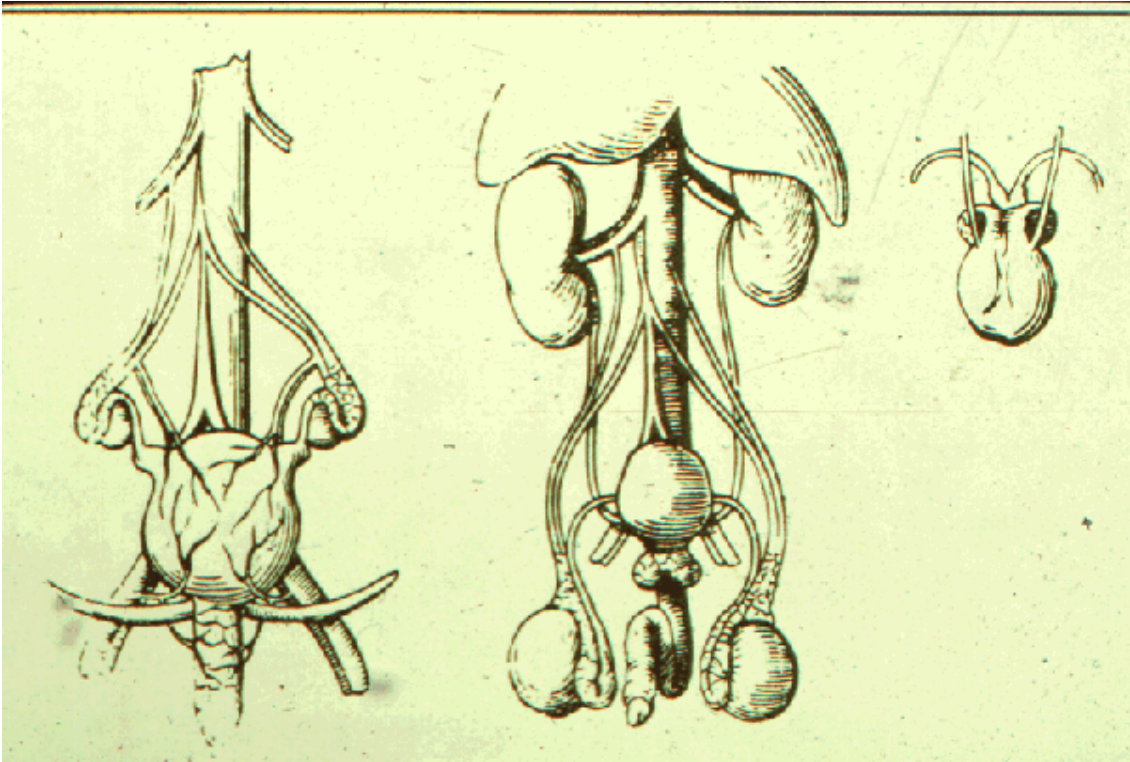






Constructs of the female body in antiquity (Helen King)

- The one-sex model (Aristotle and Galen)
- The 'sliding-scale' model (some Hippocratic texts)
- The 'Hippocratic' model (main Hippocratic gynaecological texts)



‘One-sex model’: Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* 2.3

Just as it sometimes happens that deformed offspring are produced by deformed parents, and sometimes not, so the offspring produced by a female are sometimes female, sometimes not, but male. The reason is that the female is as it were a deformed male; and the menstrual discharge is semen, though in an impure condition; i.e. it lacks one constituent, and one only, the principle of Soul.

‘One-sex
model’:
Galen, *On
the Usefulness
of the Parts of
the Body*
14.6-7

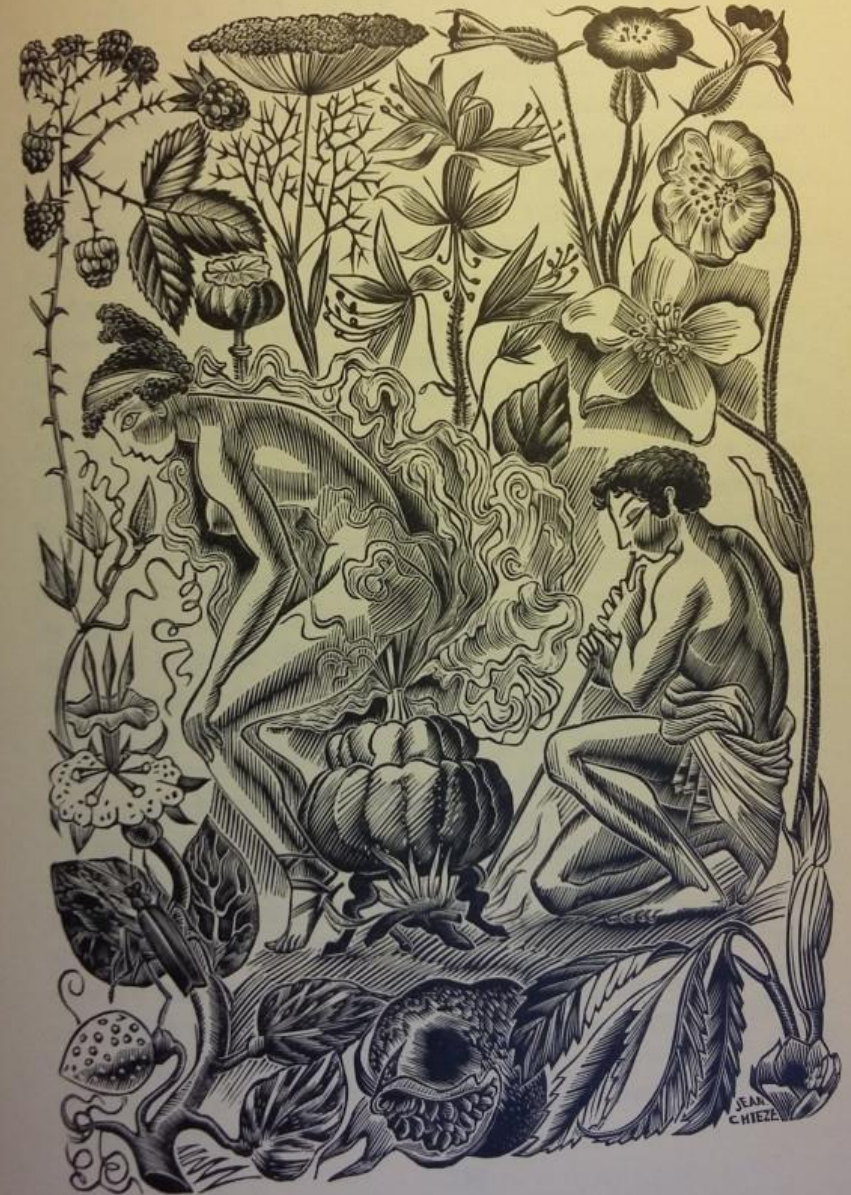
The female is less perfect than the male for one, principal reason – because she is colder, for if among animals the warm one is the more active, a colder animal would be less perfect than a warmer. A second reason is one that appears in dissecting... All the parts, then, that men have, women have too, the difference between them lying in only one thing, which must be kept in mind throughout the discussion, namely, that in women the parts are within [the body], whereas in men they are outside, in the region called the perineum.

Sliding-slide model: *Epidemics* 6.8.32

In Abdera, Phaethousa the wife of Pytheas, who kept at home, having borne children in the preceding time, when her husband was exiled [or, when her husband fled] stopped menstruating for a long time. Afterwards pains and reddening in the joints. When that happened, her body was masculinised and grew hairy all over, she grew a beard, her voice became harsh, and though we did everything we could to bring forth menses they did not come, but she died after surviving a short time. The same thing happened to Nanno, Gorgippos' wife, in Thasos. All the physicians I met thought that there was one hope of feminising her, if normal menstruation occurred. But in her case too it was not possible, though we did everything, but she died quickly.

The 'Hippocratic' woman

- Women are entirely different from men
- The flesh of women is wet and spongy
- Because of their flesh women accumulate more blood than men; they must get rid of it through menstruation, pregnancy or lactation – heavy menstrual loss; pregnancy viewed as positive
- Women have a *hodos* (tube) that goes from their vagina to their head
- The womb is compared to a jar. It moves within the body when it gets too dry
- Where do these theories come from?



Diseases of Women 1.1

I say that a woman has more spongy flesh and is softer than a man. Now since this is so, the woman's body draws moisture from the belly both more readily and in greater quantity than does a man's body. For example, if someone should set clean fleece and a clean garment, thickly woven and equal in weight to the fleece, over water or in a damp place for two days and two nights, he will find when he removes them and weighs them that the fleece is much heavier than the cloth. This happens because there is always movement up and away from water contained in a wide-mouthed jar. Because the fleece is spongy and soft it receives more of the evaporation, while because the garment is full and thickly woven, it will be totally filled after it has received only a small amount of what evaporates off. Thus, because a woman is spongier, she draws moisture in greater quantity and with greater speed from her belly to her body than a man does.

Diseases of Women 2.123

When the womb moves toward the head and suffocation occurs in that region, the woman's head becomes heavy, though there are different symptoms in some cases. One symptom: the woman says the veins in her nose hurt and beneath her eyes, and she becomes sleepy, and when this condition is alleviated, she foams at the mouth.



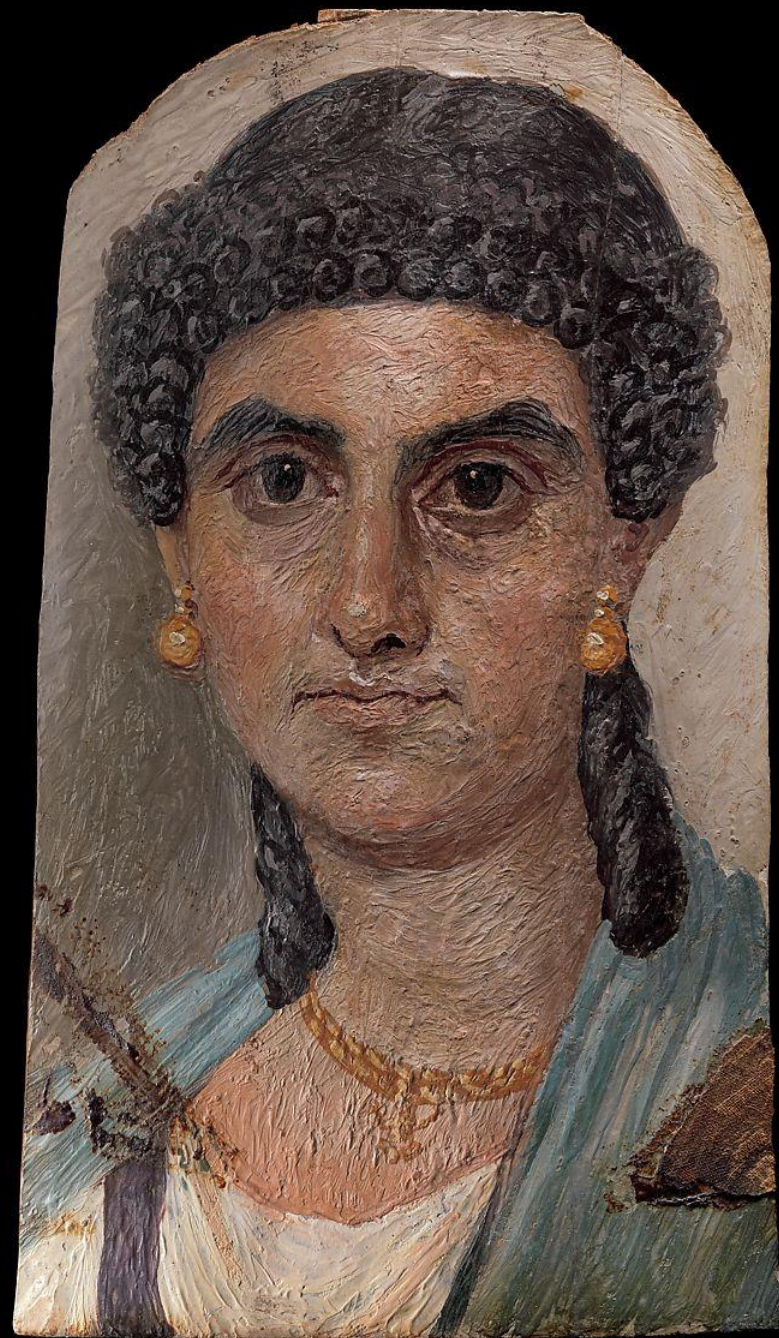
The Hippocratic female patient

- The inexperienced woman
- The experienced woman
- Treatments
 - Regimen
 - Sexual intercourse and sexual therapy
 - Pharmacological remedies
 - Manipulations



The Soranic woman

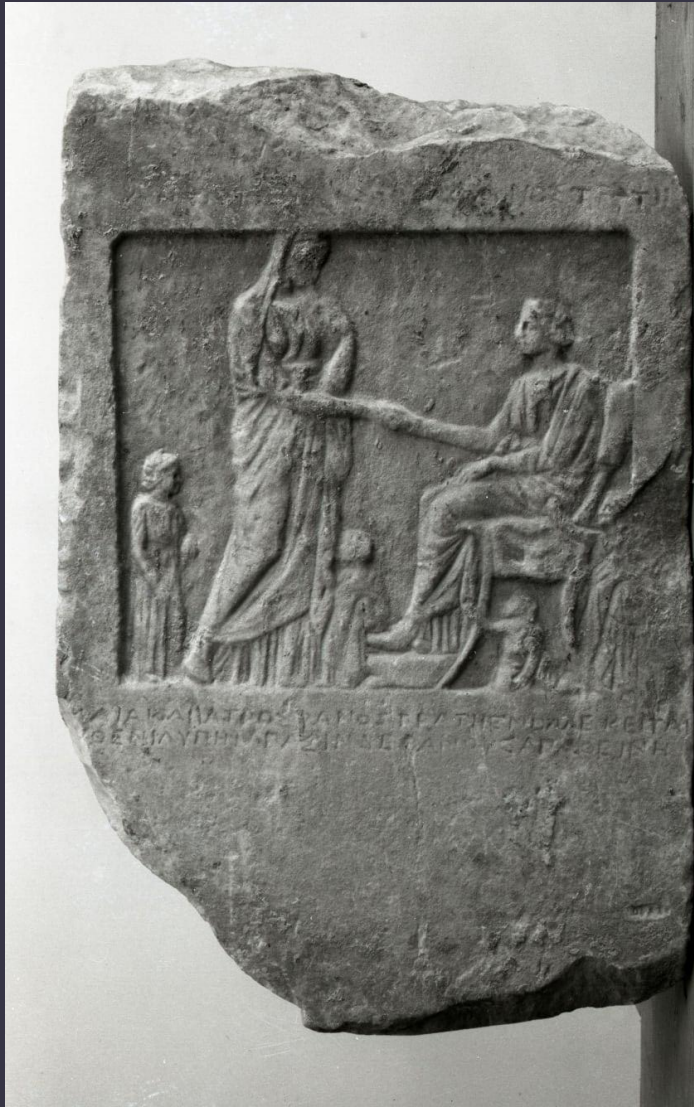
- Soranus has a good knowledge of female anatomy. In particular, he knows that the uterus cannot move (ligaments)
- Menstruation is harmful to women
- Pregnancy is harmful to women
- There are no diseases particular to women
- Treatments of women: similar to Hippocratic treatments but less harsh – allows for use of amulets



Women as healers

- Midwives are conspicuously absent from the Hippocratic Corpus
- Socrates' mother; Phanostrate
- Story of Agnodice and Herophilus
- Soranus' perfect midwife
- Galen's competition against the midwives
- Midwives and female healers: epigraphic evidence





Stele of Phanistrate (Athens, fourth century BCE)

Phanistrate, midwife (*maia*) and physician (*iatros*), lies here at rest. She caused pain to none, and her death was lamented by all.

Tomb of Scribonia

May this monument be protected against intentional evil! Scribonia Attice has built <this monument> for herself and for Marcus Ulpius Amerimnus, her husband, for Scribonia Callityche, her mother, for Diocles and for her freedmen with their descendants, with exception of Panaratus and Prosdocia. The monument can't be inherited by strangers.



Bas-relief antique en terre cuite, ornant le monument funéraire d'une sage-femme romaine, récemment découvert à Ostie. (Voir communication du professeur Capparoni, page 243). — Ce bas-relief représente une scène d'accouchement. La parturiente, nue, est assise sur le fauteuil obstétrical. Derrière elle, une assistante la maintient fermement en lui passant un bras sous l'aisselle. Devant, la sage-femme, vêtue d'une longue tunique, assise sur un petit tabouret, paraît s'opposer à la sortie trop brusque de la tête de l'enfant.









Conclusions

Various conceptions of the female body in antiquity

The knowledge of women in matters of gynaecology was acknowledged

We have numerous sources regarding female healers