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Classical Influence on the Gynecology of the Virgin Mary

In understanding the gynecology of a virgin mother in antiquity it is necessary to read the writings and theories on virginity and birth from the classics. The purpose of this research is to demonstrate that there is a strong classical influence on the gynecology of the Virgin Mary. There are six major sources used to research this claim. *The British Medical Journal* offers insight to the Temple of Aesculapius and how studying early medicine is necessary, as well as the role of Aesculapius in Ancient Rome. *Papers of the British School at Rome* discusses the fertility cults, the integration of women in religious life in Italy, and the role of votives in promoting maternal health and family continuity. *The Athenian Agora* offers a catalogue of anatomical votives and produces images of reliefs and votives found in the Agora. This source is useful in gaining numerical data on how many and what type of votives were dedicated to each deity. Edith Hamilton's, *Mythology*, gives extensive information on the life of Aesculapius. This source is necessary in finding the parallels between the stories of the virginal births. *The Protoevangelium of James* provides information on the gynecology of the Virgin Mary. Finally, Julia Lillis offers an overview of classical medical writers as well as theological writers and compared their views on the anatomical and physical aspects of virginity.

Through this research came quite a bit of findings. Such as, the mother of Aesculapius was a virgin, and a white messenger bird delivered the prophecy of his coming (similar to the biography of Christ). The island of Aesculapius was built on the foundation of having a temple for the god of health, this finding was especially helpful when looking for the combinations of

health and myth. Fertility was a popular personal concern brought by both men and women to the deities of Rome through pray, votive, sacrifice, etc. Archaeology has often underplayed the complexities of the votive phenomenon to the Roman religion, eight of the twelve reliefs found in 1939 depict female breasts and pelvises. More anatomical votive reliefs have come from dedication to Aesculapius than any other Athenian healer. The hand of the midwife, according to the Protoevangelium, was the first healing miracle of Christ and this was through the womb of Mary. In one of his homilies on the Gospel of Luke he declares that Christ opened the womb of his mother (which implies that through the action of giving birth Mary's hymen is no longer intact), the idea of a hymenal barricade of virginal seal is extremely rare in the Mediterranean and Near East until the 4th century CE. This lack of a recognition of a hymenal barricade creates the question, is there any physical quality to Virginité. Finally, Tertullian was the earliest writer to describe virginité as a state of genital closure. Though these may seem like points on a wide spectrum we can conclude that there are indeed similarities in the virginal stories of the mother of Aesculapius and Mary and a strong emphasis on maternal and reproductive health in antiquity.



Agora XVIII, pp. 288,297, 299, 313, no. V574, pl. 58

This study revealed that the story of Mary is not one that would have been unfamiliar. There are practical implications in understanding the gynecology of Mary and what may have influenced the story. While Mary's story wasn't copy and paste of classical myths the comparison with Christ and Aesculapius as well as the views of the ancients on virginité and maternal health prove that these stories were already something the ancients would have been familiar with. These influences can be found both mythologically and anatomically, so this

mashing together of the sciences and myths makes for a rather compelling argument. Regarding secondary findings the following will show a list of parallels in the life of Christ and Aesculapius. We have already discussed the parallels in their birth stories, but this list should be seen as proof of more classical influence on Christianity.

Christ

Virgin Mother

White Messenger Bird

Raising the Dead

Healing the Sick

Healing the Blind

Son of God but mortal

“The Good Shepard”

Aesculapius

Virgin Mother

White Messenger Bird

Raising the Dead

Healing the Sick

Healing the Blind

Deity but mortal

“The Good Physician”

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