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THE RAM'S HEADS ON THE POMPEIAN
QUADRIVALVE SPECULUM
(BLIQUEZ, JACKSON 291; NAPLES ARCH. MUS. 113264)¹

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SUMMARY

This article discusses the hypothesis that the ram's heads on the speculum recovered in Pompeii in 1881-82 had some symbolic significance - on the basis of the connection between the ram and the human reproductive organs, well testified in Egyptian mythology. In fact, there is ample evidence of Egyptian influence in Pompeii, particularly nearby the houses where we presume the discovery of the speculum was made.

Attractive décor is commonly found on Greco-Roman surgical instruments and paraphernalia. This may consist of abstract motifs such as raised rings, lattice patterns, striation, and finials resembling balusters, door-knobs, etc. In many cases the motifs are recognizable as acanthus and ivy leaves, a knotty limb or club, the head of a wolf, a snake or its head, a lion's head, even the bust of the god/hero Hercules².

Many of these motifs may have had the practical effect of helping to secure the surgeon's grip; but often they have recognizable symbolic value. The wolf's head, for example, alludes to Apollo Lykios, therefore Apollo Medicus, father of Asclepius, while the bust of Hercules or his knotty club and lion skin with head suggest endurance in the face of suffering³. The limb/club design could also allude to Asclepius'

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staff and, if one were inclined to doubt that, the snake sometimes wound around it clearly signifies the healing presence of that deity.

The head of the snake alone appears in particular on a familiar gynecological instrument, the worm driven uterine speculum, certainly the most intricate of all Greco-Roman surgical tools to come down to us. Dilation of the female genitalia made possible by this special tool allowed for complex and efficient gynecological interventions under the Roman Empire. Specifically, the speculum was deployed to relieve a host of conditions affecting the vagina and uterus, including abscess, ulceration, cancer, fissures, and growths such as *porroi*, *thyme*, *myrmecia*, and *acrochordon*⁴.

Two trivalve models in particular with the snake's head motif have been known for a long time. These were recovered at Pompeii in 1818 and 1887 respectively and clearly mark locations in the city where gynecology was practiced (Fig. 1). The snake's head appears at the terminus of each of the bars used to steady these instruments, which, according to the literary sources, were manipulated by the physician's assistant during use⁵.

Yet a third model has surfaced in Pompeii, having been recovered in excavations conducted in Regio VIII in 1881-82, though its precise find spot in Regio VIII remains unclear. More about that in a moment. Of the eleven uterine specula or their worms/screws that survive, this one is completely unique (Figs. 2 and 3). For one thing, it features four valves as opposed to the usual trivalve type; for another, it is structured differently in that it lacks the steadying bars featured on those models. Most striking is the décor: the familiar Asclepian snake's heads found on the trivalves have been supplanted on this quadrivalve by a pair of ram's heads, one mounted at each end of the cross bar through which the worm is run. By analogy with figural motifs on other surgical tools, and especially with the snake on trivalve specula, it is quite likely these ram's heads had some symbolic significance. Curiously, there seems to have been no speculation on

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Fig. 1: Trivalve Uterine Speculum, Pompeii, Nat.Arch. Mus., Naples, L. 20.5 cm. Photo courtesy of the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, Mainz L1038/7

what this might have been, perhaps because associations of the ram and medicine in Greco-Roman myth are hard to come by.

Of course the story of the Golden Fleece comes to mind, and Medea, who is a key figure in recovery of the Fleece by Jason, has associations with sorcery, witchcraft and, most important, with rejuvenation. Still, connecting Medea, herself an infanticide, with childbirth is a stretch at best, and the ram too has no such associations in Greco-Roman myth⁶. In fine, the quest for the Golden Fleece simply functions as a test for Jason, and Medea simply acts as his helper.

On the other hand a connection between the ram and the organs of human reproduction can be made in Egyptian mythology, specifically with regard to what are called *creator gods*. These divine beings represent creative and rejuvenative power, hence health and fertility. As is common with Egyptian deities, creator gods can assume theriomorphic form, and the form assumed is sometimes that of a ram. The gods Amun-Re and Khnum, for example, are so depicted in their images, as is the god of resurrection, Osiris⁷. The connection with fertility is well represented on the Egyptian Papyrus of Tameniu, now in the British Museum. There we find a panel depicting the mating of Sky and Earth; that is of Nut and Geb (Fig. 4). To the left of the mating pair there appear two animal gods, both interpreted as representing creative power. One is a ram, said to be a manifestation of Osiris⁸. Magical spells may also be brought to bear. Among those for facilitating the birth process we find at least one attributed to Khnum⁹.

This brings us back to the quadrivalve. If it's owner/operator was Egyptian, or simply had an Egyptian connection, such as training or practice in Alexandria, the image of a ram with creative power on an instrument applied to maintain the health and fertility of the female genitals would not be inappropriate.

To return to Pompeii, there is ample evidence of Egyptian influence in the city. The focal point of Egyptian cult there was the well-documented Temple of Isis where Osiris was also worshiped. The location

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Fig. 2: Quadrivalve Uterine Speculum, Pompeii, Nat. Arch. Mus., Naples, L. 31 cm. Photo courtesy of the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, Mainz L1037/1

of the temple is interesting as it is situated in Regio VIII (7.28); that is, just steps away from the find spot of the speculum of interest¹⁰.

Unfortunately, as noted above, it is not clear in which nearby house the discovery was made. There are two candidates: The House of Acceptus and Euhodia (VIII 5.39) and the Casa del Medico Nuovo I (VIII 5.24), both of which might lay claim¹¹. The former reflects that connection most vividly, as it contained ‘five statuettes of Egyptian divinities made of glazed pottery’, a painting of the goddess Fortuna-Isis, and a table leg inscribed in Greek with the Egyptian name Sarapion¹². Several German investigators have favored this house as a birthing clinic operated by freedmen (*Freigelassene*) from Alexandria. In addition to the Egyptian evidence just cited, they collectively point to a marble relief of a child holding what is interpreted as a feeding bottle (*ampolla*) and to the speculum, believed to have been found on this site¹³.

The Casa del Medico Nuovo I, while not furnished with such ready associations does provide a viable hint of Egypt in the well known paintings that decorated the walls of its pseudo peristyle. These paintings show pygmies in combat with a hippopotamus and a crocodile and are considered *nach alexandrinischen Manier*, or in English as *Nilotic*. Executed in the fourth style they are thought to have been painted not too long before the fatal eruption of 79¹⁴. In recent times the Casa del Medico Nuovo I has been favored as the find spot of the speculum for two reasons: a) its association with the well known wall painting interpreted as the *Judgement of Solomon* also found in the pseudo peristyle or *viridario*, and b) the fact that the Casa del Medico Nuovo I was clearly, based on the surgical instruments found therein, a medical site, even without the speculum¹⁵. This is not apparent in the case of the House of Acceptus and Euhodia in the absence of that instrument¹⁶.

The truth is that in 1882 the two houses were confused with one another and we will probably never know for sure in which dwelling the ram’s head speculum was found¹⁷. If it were recovered in the

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Fig. 3: Quadrivalve Uterine Speculum, Pompeii, Detail. Photo courtesy of the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, Mainz L1042/10

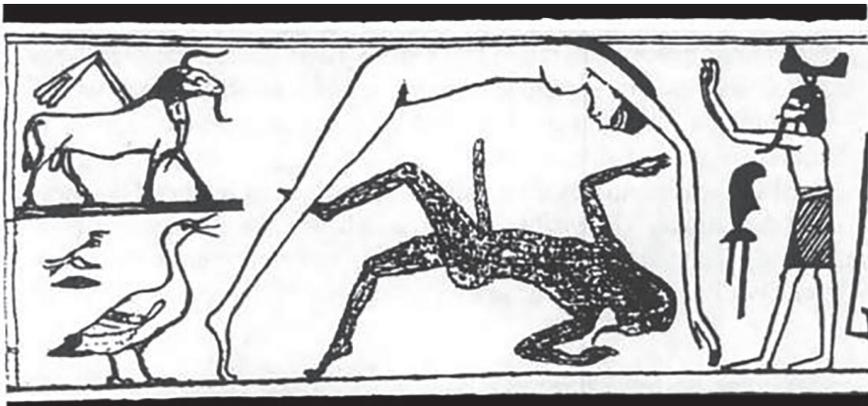


Fig. 4: Papyrus of Tameniu, Brit. Museum papyrus EA10002,3. © Trustees of the British Museum

House of Acceptus and Euhodia, that would most strongly support the proposal made here. But both houses in proximity to the Isis Temple vividly underscore the presence of Egyptian influences in Pompeii and both provide suitable venues.

It is received opinion that Alexandria was a center of surgical innovation and training in the Greco-Roman world¹⁸. A smattering of indisputable archaeological evidence reflects this. I refer to the little container in the form of a hippopotamus mounted by a uraeus found in the rich instrumentarium of a surgeon's grave at Bingen-am-Rhein.¹⁹ A piece like this certainly reflects Egyptian if not Alexandrian influences, perhaps even pointing to the Bingen doctor's place of training (if not nationality) and/or to the container's place of manufacture. I should like to think the Pompeian quadrivalve also reflects such associations.

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1. I am grateful to Professor Scott Noegel for providing useful information on Egyptian creator gods.
2. BLIQUEZ L. J., *Tools of Asclepius*. Leiden, Brill, 2015, pp. 19-20.
3. At least four scalpel handles representing Hercules have been found at Pompeii; see BLIQUEZ L.J., JACKSON R., *Roman Surgical Instruments and Other Minor Objects in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples*. Mainz/Rhein, Von Zabern, 1994, pp. 119-120, nos 41-43. A further specimen has surfaced at Corinth; see, DAVIDSON G., *Corinth*, Vol. XII. Princeton, American

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- School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1952, p. 191, no. 1406. There is word of another in Jerusalem (private communication Mr. Abraham Levi).
4. For a complete list of conditions and the sources for them see, BLIQUEZ L.J., *Gynecological Surgery from the Hippocratics to the Fall of the Roman Empire*. *Medicina nei Secoli* 2010; 22, (1-3): 25-64 and BLIQUEZ L. J., see note 2, pp. 251-55. These sources also prescribe use of the uterine speculum for aborting an impacted embryo. This procedure may not appear a 'creative' act; but it could be seen as such in that, as in treatment of other vaginal/uterine maladies, it preserves the mother's health and allows for further pregnancies.
 5. Aëtius, 16.89.1-18, copied by Paul of Aegina, 6.73.1-2; also 3.65.1.
 6. Ovid presents a handy account of Medea's doings in *Metamorphosis*, 7.1-424. This includes the rejuvenation of Aeson, ll. 250-293, and the murder of her children, ll. 391-403. The pretense of rejuvenating Pelias involves the rejuvenation of a ram but this hocus-pocus leads directly to Pelias' murder at ll. 298-350.
 7. For Amun-Re, Amun Kamutef, Min Amun Re, and Khnum as a ram; see REDFORD D. B. (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*. 3 vols, Oxford, Oxford Press, 2001; Vol. 1, pp. 82-85 and Vol. 2, pp. 221-222, 231-232 and 413-415. The rejuvenative powers of Osiris were lately connected with a peculiar feature of King Tut's mummy; see IKRAM S., *Some Thoughts on the Mummification of King Tutankhamun*. *Études et Travaux*, 2013; 26:292-301, especially p. 299.
 8. See POWELL B. B., *Classical Myth*. 5th ed., Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2000, p. 82, Fig. 4.1.
 9. See BORGHOOTS J., *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts*. Leiden, Brill, 1978, p. 105, n. 150, spell no. 62 = Papyrus Leiden I, 20: rt. 13, 9-11 (XIX to XXIst dynasty, 1102-952 BCE). I owe the reference to Professor Noegel.
 10. For the Temple and its environs see MAU A., KELSEY F.W., *Pompeii, Its Life and Art*. 2nd. ed., London, MacMillan, 1902, pp. 168-183.
 11. BLIQUEZ L.J., JACKSON R., see note 3, pp. 81-82. In the modern history of Pompeii dwellings have been given a number of names: *Acceptus* and *Euhodia* has only one, but *Medico Nuovo I* (Eschebach's term), also goes by *Casa del Medico*, *House of the Doctor*, *Casa del Chirurgo*, *Casa del Gallo*, and *Casa del giudizio di Salomone*. See VANDERPOEL H.B., FEDERICO F., *Corpus Topographicum Pompeianum*. Rome, University of Texas Press, 1997-1986, pt. II, *Toponymy*, p. 305.
 12. MAU A., KELSEY, F.W., see note 10, pp. 341-343. ESCHEBACH H., *Die Arzthäuser in Pompeii*. Feldmeilen, Switzerland, Raggi-Verlag,

- Sondernummer *Antike Welt*, 15, Jahrgang 1984, pp. 48-50, also notes images ('Plastiken') of Bes, the dwarfish god who protects mothers in childbirth.
13. ESCHEBACH H., see note 12, who incorporates the unpublished Habilitationsschrift of Hartmut Döhl, *Plastik in Pompeji*, Göttingen, 1976.
 14. For the fourth style and its date see, LING R., *Roman Painting*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, repr. 2006, pp. 71-99, and esp. 165-166.
 15. BLIQUEZ L. J., JACKSON R., see note 3, pp. 13, 81-82. Equipment included two of the familiar long round boxes ('astucci') containing 'tasti' (spatula and spoon probes, etc.), two mortars, a pestle, a scale, and a box of pills. Bliquez speculates that a douche/clyster and birthing retractors were also present. If they were, they would fit well with a speculum.
 16. ESCHEBACH H., see note 12, p. 50, reports only some glass vessels, a 'Pinzette' 125mm in length, 2 strigils and a razor.
 17. For the mixup see ESCHEBACH H., see note 12, p. 45 and BLIQUEZ L. J., JACKSON R., see note 3, pp. 81-82.
 18. See, e.g., NUTTON V., *Ancient Medicine*. Routledge, London and New York, 2005, repr. 2007, pp. 142, 217-218; SCARBOROUGH J., *Teaching Surgery in late Byzantine Alexandria*. In: HORSTMANSHOFF M. (ed.), *Hippocrates and Medical Education* Leiden and Boston, E. J. Brill, 2010 = *Studies in Ancient Medicine*. Vol. 35, pp. 235-260. For negative opinion of Alexandrian surgeons in a late text see Fulgentius, *Mythol.* Preface p. 9 (Helm).
 19. COMO J., *Das Grab eines römischen Arztes in Bingen*. Germania, 9, 1925, pp. 152-162, especially 158, nos. 1-3; reproduced in: KUENZL E. (with the collaboration of HASSEL F. J. and KUENZL S.), *Medizinische Instrumente aus Sepulkralfinden der römischen Kaiserzeit*. Bonn, In Kommission bei R. Habelt, 1983 = Sonderdruck aus den Bonner Jahrbüchern, Bd. 182, 1982, cover and p. 83, nos. 57.1-3.

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