



A Matter of Blood. Female Health and Impurity in Byzantine Medical and Canonical Discourses

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Riassunto

I lettori contemporanei dei testi bizantini riguardanti il ciclo mestruale possono osservare un certo grado di ambiguità nella rappresentazione di questo argomento. La tradizione ebraica antica mostra una percezione prevalentemente negativa del sangue della donna, evidente in varie parti del Levitico. Queste vedute influenzarono successivamente vari aspetti della società bizantina. Mentre la medicina erudita bizantina, vista come erede della tradizione ippocratica, considera il rapporto sessuale con una donna mestrata non favorevole al concepimento, la conoscenza medica popolare lo reputa causa di lebbra. Inoltre, il diritto canonico bizantino vieta alle donne di partecipare alla liturgia durante il ciclo mestruale attivo. Attraverso un'indagine sull'influenza e sulla coerenza nei testi bizantini, questo studio sostiene che l'allineamento delle opinioni tra gli scrittori bizantini riguardo al sangue delle donne suggerisca una condivisione culturale derivante da fonti ebraiche e una potenziale interazione nella trattazione dell'argomento. Comprendendo il contesto storico e le influenze, è possibile ottenere approfondimenti sulla formazione dei pregiudizi bizantini nei confronti delle donne e del loro sangue.

Summary

Contemporary readers of Byzantine texts concerning menstruation may discern a level of ambiguity in the portrayal of this subject. Early Jewish tradition predominantly conveys a negative perception of a woman's blood, notably evident in various passages of Leviticus. These views subsequently had a profound influence on various aspects of Byzantine society. While Byzantine learned medicine, viewed as the heir to the Hippocratic tradition, deems engaging in sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman as non-conducive to conception, popular medical knowledge regards such an act as a source of leprosy. Furthermore, Byzantine canon law prohibits women from participating in the liturgy during active menstruation. Through an exploration of influence and consistency in Byzantine texts, this study argues that the alignment of opinions among Byzantine writers regarding women's blood suggests a shared cultural influence stemming from Jewish sources and a potential mutual influence in their treatment of the subject. By understanding the historical context and influences, it is possible to gain insights into the formation of Byzantine biased attitudes towards women and their blood.

Parole chiave: Corpus Hippocraticum, ginecologia, mestruazioni, medicina bizantina, lebbra, diritto canonico bizantino

Keywords: Hippocratic Corpus, Gynaecology, Menstruation, Byzantine Medicine, Leprosy, Byzantine Canon Law

Early Medical Understanding of Women's Physiology in the Hippocratic Corpus

Within the *Hippocratic Corpus*, the compilation of medical texts attributed to the physician Hippocrates of Cos, are several works that focus on the physiology of women and gynaecology. These studies provide the first attempt at a scientific understanding of the female body and its morbid states¹. The *Corpus'* treatises that shed light on the medical gynaecological theories in ancient times are *De mulierum affectibus*², divided into two major books, *De natura muliebri* and *De sterilibus*³. As the texts provide insights into menstrual blood and the various pathologies associated with its flow through the female body, it can easily be argued that the Hippocratic physicians were aware of menstruation's relevancy in women's biological functions and health⁴. In

* In this article, author names and titles of works are presented in full at their initial citation, accompanied by the specific edition referenced for its preparation. In subsequent citations, where authors' names and work titles recur identically, abbreviations have been employed, omitting the need to restate the reference edition.

¹ See the noteworthy introduction in V. ANDÒ, *Ippocrate. Natura della donna*, Rizzoli, Milano 2000, pp. 5-83.

² The editor Joly agrees with Littré, and he believes that the gynaecological treatises *De mulierum affectibus*, *De virginum morbis* and *De sterilibus* have the same author, who is prior to Aristotle ("Il nous paraît impossible de ne pas admettre cette attribution": R. JOLY, *Hippocrate: De la génération. De la nature de l'enfant. Des maladies IV. Du fœtus de huit mois*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1970, p. 24). See É. LITTRÉ, *Oeuvres complètes d'Hippocrate. Volume 1*, J.B. Baillière, Paris 1839, p. 373; see also É. LITTRÉ, *Oeuvres complètes d'Hippocrate. Volume 8*, J.B. Baillière, Paris 1853, p. 6.

³ The affinity between the three texts is particularly evident in the arrangement of the exposed material. They consist of different news about diseases or types of diseases, and the matter is always presented following the same pattern: description of symptoms, prognosis, therapy; sometimes there may also be a list of possible remedies.

⁴ In Aristophanes' comedies can be found the first nonmedical reference to menstruation and menstrual blood in Greek literature: in Aristophanes *Acharnenses* 773 sq. (*Aristophanes: Acharnians*, ed. S. DOUGLAS OLSON, Ox-

an overall analysis of these treatises, the recurring term for menses is ἐπιμήνια⁵, which is alternated with καταμήνια⁶.

Since “the Classical Greeks did not dissect human bodies”⁷, and menstrual blood is an external secretion of women, it constitutes a direct observable element by the Hippocratic science and one of the main distinguishing factors of female versus male physiology⁸. “In Hippocratic gynaecology, to be a woman is to menstru-

ford University Press, Oxford 2004), the female genitalia are designated with the noun χοῖρος (‘pork’, perhaps alluding to a pig’s snout), and the bandage used by women to soak up menstrual blood is the χοιροκομειόν (lit. ‘pigsty’). See S.B. POMEROY, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, Schocken Books, New York 1975.

⁵ I quote only some textual references as an example: Hippocrates *De natura muliebri* 13.1 (*Hippocrate: Nature de la femme*, ed. F. BOURBON, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2008); Hippoc. *De mulierum affectibus* 1.22, 112.8 (*Hippocrates: Diseases of Women 1-2*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge [Massachusetts] 2018); Hippoc. *De sterilibus* 217.7 (*Hippocrate: Femmes Stériles; Maladie des jeunes filles; Superfétation; Excision du fœtus*, ed. F. BOURBON, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2017). Due to a fluctuation in the manuscript tradition of *De natura muliebri*, instead of the *lectio* ἐπιμήνια, contained in the codex *Parisinus gr.* 2140 (13th century) and accepted by Littré and Trapp for their editions of the treatise, the codex *Marcianus gr.* 269 (10th century) has ἔμμηνα, while both the codices *Vindobonensis med. Gr.* 4 (11th century) and *Vaticanus gr.* 276 (12th century) have ἔμμήνια. According to the editor Bourbon, “la variante ἔμμήνια est donc une forme analogique de ἐπιμήνια, et la leçon ἔμμηνα, probablement plus ancienne, lui est préférable” (BOURBON, *Nature de la femme* cit., p. 99. Cf. É. LITTRÉ, *Oeuvres complètes d’Hippocrate. Volume 7*, J.B. Baillières, Paris 1851). In spite of the variants, the association of the terms with μῆν (‘month’) is clear, as menses are named according to their monthly frequency.

⁶ The term recurs widely in Hippoc. *Mul.* and Hippoc. *Steril.*, while only six occurrences are recorded in Hippoc. *Nat. mul.* (13.6, 53.1, 106.2, 106.4, 109.57, 109.76). The word γυναικεῖα is used in two passages in the sense of ‘menstruation’ in Hippoc. *Nat. mul.* 67.1, 109.63.

⁷ L.A. DEAN-JONES, *Menstrual Bleeding according to the Hippocratics and Aristotle*, “Transactions of the American Philological Association”, CXIX, 1989, p. 177.

⁸ Ivi, pp. 177-178. The onset of menarche signifies the initiation of a young female’s (παρθένος) maturation process towards full-fledged adulthood; in order to be considered as a mature woman (γυνή), to have given birth was deemed a

ate”⁹: the Hippocratic physician expounds on the origin of various illnesses in women in relation to the accumulation of humours, which can arise from a lack of menstruation¹⁰ due to diverse pathological factors, or to excessive blood flow¹¹: a proper balance¹² and quality¹³ of menstrual bleeding are considered hallmarks of women's health. Thus, irregularity in menses can rapidly manifest as a symptom of disease, and treatment aims to fully restore the norm by administering herbs that act as emmenagogues or astringents¹⁴, or by using pessaries and fumigations¹⁵.

requisite criterion. See H. KING, *Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece*, Routledge, London - New York 1998, p. 23.

⁹ KING, *Hippocrates' Woman* cit., p. 76. Already in the archaic age, blood is the element that distinguishes human physiology from the divine one: in the veins of the gods, who neither eat bread nor drink wine, flows ichor (ἰχώρ), the immortal sap (see Homer *Ilias* 5.339-342, *Homerus: Ilias. Rhapsodiae I-XII*, ed. M.L. WEST, De Gruyter, Berlin 1998). In the texts of the *Hippocratic Corpus*, the woman, whose body is wet and spongy, is distinguished from the man by the greater production of blood and the need to evacuate it at regular rhythms (see Hippoc. *Mul.* 1.36-49).

¹⁰ See Hippoc. *Nat. mul.* 10.1-7; see also Hippoc. *Mul.* 1.1-14. Cf. Hippoc. *Mul.* 57.1-8. The humoral excess, metabolized in the blood, must be expelled in the periodic menstrual κάθαρσις ('purge'); otherwise, it can compress vital organs, potentially leading to diseases and ultimately resulting in death.

¹¹ Hippoc. *Nat. mul.* 13.1-7. Cf. Hippoc. *Mul.* 166.1-6. Cf. also *Nat. mul.* 45.

¹² See Hippoc. *Mul.* 6.4, where exact amount of monthly menstrual flow of a healthy woman is indicated, that is two Attic cotyles (approximately 1 UK pint). The same quantity is also reported by Aëtius of Amida in his gynaecological encyclopaedia (see *Iatricorum liber* 16.4.5,6, *Gynaekologie des Aëtios*, ed. S. ZERVOS, Fock, Leipzig 1901). Cf. Hippoc. *De aëre, aquis, locis* 21 (*Hippocrates: Airs, eaux, lieux*, ed. J. JOUANNA, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1996).

¹³ Hippoc. *Mul.* 6.11-12 describes the quality of a healthy woman's menstrual blood, which it should flow "like that of a sacrificial animal" and "quickly congeal" (trans. POTTER, *Diseases of Women* cit.).

¹⁴ Among the herbal remedies, I limit myself to mentioning the emmenagogue properties of fennel (μάραθρον, *Foeniculum vulgare*) and wormwood (ἀψίνθιον, *Artemisia Absinthium*), as stated in Hippoc. *Nat. mul.* 8.6-8. The physician and botanist Pedanius Dioscorides also speaks of the ability of these plants to stimulate menstruation: see e.g. Dioscorides *De materia medica* 3.23,70, *Pedanii Dioscuridis Anazarbei de materia medica libri quinque, 3 vols.*, ed. M. WELL-

Nonetheless, in Hippocratic gynaecology the most severe disorder associated with the retention of menstrual blood is that of amenorrhea, that is the pathological disappearance of menstruation¹⁶. The interruption of menses in the absence of pregnancy or menopause is perceived as a cause for deep concern, signalling a potential incapacity for conception¹⁷: in cases where menstruation fails to occur, the uterine veins become engorged with blood to the extent that they are unable to retain semen. In fact, menstrual

MANN, Weidmann, Berlin 1:1907; 2:1906; 3:1914 (repr. 1958). Furthermore, an astringent is mentioned in Hippoc. *Nat. mul.* 32.106, as the ἄγνου φύλλα (chaste tree's leaves) are prescribed to block the menstrual flow.

¹⁵ The therapeutic regimen outlined in these treatises contains certain elements that are of an unconventional nature and may seem peculiar to modern readers. For instance, Spanish flies (κανθαρίδες), used as components of pessaries or beverages, have their wings, legs, and heads removed before being ground up (Hippoc. *Mul.* 1.74, 78, 84, 2.135; Hippoc. *Nat. mul.* 32). Additionally, a fumigation may include the soil beneath the hoof of a donkey among its ingredients (Hippoc. *Nat. mul.* 103. Cf. Aëtius of Amida *Iatricorum liber* 16.30-42). Furthermore, if the woman experiences post-partum vomiting of blood, a regimen of black cow's milk is prescribed for a duration of forty days, along with a beverage made of ground sesame (Hippoc. *Nat. mul.* 52). Critics argue that these medical recipes reveal a magical substratum from an older era, despite the rationalistic approach underlying Hippocratic medicine (see R. JOLY, *Le niveau de la science hippocratique*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1966, p. 52; see also A. THIVEL, *Cnide et Cos? Essai sur les doctrines médicales dans la Collection hippocratique*, Les Belles Lettres Paris 1981, p. 99).

¹⁶ In Hippocratic medicine, amenorrhea is regarded as an autonomous disease, rather than a consequence of other pathologies. See e.g. Hippoc. *Nat. Mul.* 18, 23, 59, 71, 74, 77.

¹⁷ The Greek theatrical authors, both tragic and comic, provide evidence of the difficulties faced by infertile couples or women: people sought not only the advice of physicians, but also the counsel of oracles. For instance, in Euripides *Ion* 304 (Euripides, *Ion: Edition and Commentary*, ed. G. MARTIN, De Gruyter, Berlin - Boston 2018), a couple consults the Oracle at Delphi because they have been unable to conceive for a long time. Aristophanes, in *Thesmophoriazusae* 502-515 (Aristophanes: *Thesmophoriazusae*, ed. S. DOUGLAS OLSON, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004), narrates a story in which an infertile woman fakes labour pains for ten days and then presents her husband with a purchased child.

flow indicates that the uterus is adequately open to receive and to hold inside male seed¹⁸, and it is recommended that sexual intercourse be engaged in towards the end of menstruation, as there is enough residual blood present to provide the necessary material for foetal development; accordingly, the sperm does not flow out of the uterus, as it would at the onset of menses¹⁹.

As “menstruation is [...] something about which, outside medical texts, we hardly hear”²⁰ in Classical Greek authors, there appears to be no connection between impurity and contamination with menstrual blood, which is not feared and is not attributed with any power that would border on the magical²¹. On the one hand, the absence of explicit references does not necessarily imply a positive valuation of menstrual flow: starting from the lack of sources, it can be thought that menstruation is “a fact so secret and shaming [that it cannot] be alluded to at all”²². On the other hand, it should be noted that the extensive citation of the female menstrual cycle in prescriptive medical texts suggests a certain level of awareness and importance attributed to it. This is particularly notable in the complete absence of any qualitative judgment, either positive or negative, which is a constant feature of scientific medicine in the Greek language, from Classical times to Byzantium.

¹⁸ Obstruction of the uterus is the main cause of the low prolificacy of the Scythians: the fat accumulated around the womb of women (τὸ τε σπῆμα τῶν μητρῆων), due to the sedentary nature of their lives, prevents the passage of male semen and conception (Hippoc. *Aër* 21).

¹⁹ See Hippoc. *Nat. mul.* 8; Hippoc. *Mul.* 1.17. Cf. Aristotle *De generatione animalium* 727b 12-25, *Aristotelis de generatione animalium*, ed. H.J. DROSSAART LULOFS, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1965 (repr. 1972).

²⁰ See R. PARKER, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1996, p. 102.

²¹ Only some sacred laws of non-Greek cults express reservations about female menstrual blood, as they prescribe purification rituals for entering the sanctuary: *ivi*, pp. 101-102.

²² *Ivi*, p. 102. See also KING, *Hippocrates' Woman* cit., pp. 88-89.

Byzantine Medicine: Continuing Hippocratic Legacy and Bridging Traditions

As the heirs to the Hippocratic medicine, the Byzantine physicians do not depart from this approach: the emphasis is placed on observation, diagnosis, and the treatment of specific pathologies, based on a scientific understanding of the human body. In this sense, the medical compilations of Aëtius of Amida and Paul of Aegina, which inform about the state of knowledge in the field of gynaecology between the 6th and 7th century, are particularly significant. In their works, which can be considered a synthesis of the previous gynaecological doctrine, a not negligible space is reserved for potions and drugs, vaginal irrigations, fumigations, the use of sponges and pessaries²³.

For instance, Aëtius of Amida, drawing on the works of other authors²⁴, provides recipes for medicines aimed at restoring the balance of menstrual flow: in a text of clear Hippocratic influence, where important references to Soranus of Ephesus (first century), Oribasius of Pergamum (320-400), and minor medical authors are not lacking, the physician describes amenorrhea²⁵ and suggests remedies to induce menses, or to reduce the excessive

²³ See e.g., Aëtius of Amida *Iatricorum liber* 16.34; see also Paul of Aegina *Epitomae medicae libri septem* 3.61, *Paulus Aegineta*, 2 vols., ed. J.L. HEIBERG, Teubner, Leipzig 1:1921; 2:1924.

²⁴ As for the sources of Aëtius of Amida, I suggest referring to the insightful article by R. MASULLO, *Problemi relative alle fonti di Aezio Amideno nei libri IX-XVI: Filumeno, Areteo e altri medici minori*, in *Tradizione e ecdotica dei testi medici tardoantichi bizantini*, ed. A. Garzya, M. D'Auria Editore, Napoli 1992, pp. 237-256. By incorporating quotes from a multitude of ancient Greek and Roman authors, he enriched his encyclopaedic work and made it easier to understand the sometimes-unclear medical theories of those who came before him.

²⁵ Aëtius of Amida *Iatricorum liber* 16.50. According to Aëtius, women who are infertile, pregnant, engaged in singing and dancing, may not experience menstrual flow, as the physical exertion in the latter case may result in the absorption of menstrual excess. Cf. Paul of Aegina *Epitomae medicae libri septem* 3.60,61.

bleeding²⁶, ranging from a precise pharmacopoeia²⁷ to dietary regimes²⁸. Some menstrual disorders are attributed by him to the bad state of the humours and their imperfect mixing²⁹, and he provides therapies for some bladder diseases related to menstruation³⁰. In the same way, the remedies for gynaecological issues described by Paul of Aegina are similar to those proposed by Aëtius of Amida, as both authors draw from a common medical tradition³¹. Indeed, looking back in time to one of their models, Ori-

²⁶ See Aëtius of Amida *Iatricorum liber* 16.63-65, where the author describes the condition of menorrhagia and suggests some astringent remedies. He disapproves of the use of sponges soaked in a concoction of water and vinegar, stating that they can be harmful to the uterus by inducing excessive coldness. Cf. Paul of Aegina *Epitomae medicae libri septem* 3.62.

²⁷ Aëtius of Amida *Iatricorum liber* 16.51-54. Among the recipes, Aëtius recommends pessaries made from rue, bay berries, Artemisia, horseweed with light leaves, pennyroyal, and black hellebore. He emphasizes the importance of using the least harmful substances for these vaginal suppositories, which would be soaked in oil of iris. Cf. Paul of Aegina *Epitomae medicae libri septem* 3.61,64,73.

²⁸ A state of being overweight or underweight can cause the cessation of menstruation, as overweight individuals have insufficient blood in their veins, as it is consumed in the formation of fat, which in turn leads to a reduced chance of conception and the possibility of a weak offspring. Similarly, in those who are excessively thin, the required surplus of blood is lacking: Aëtius of Amida *Iatricorum liber* 16.55,56.

²⁹ Aëtius of Amida *Iatricorum liber* 16.57,68. Cf. Paul of Aegina *Epitomae medicae libri septem* 3.63.

³⁰ Aëtius of Amida *Iatricorum liber* 16.62. Cf. Paul of Aegina *Epitomae medicae libri septem* 3.64-66.

³¹ Paul of Aegina cannot be considered a mere compiler of medical texts. Despite acknowledging the influence of Oribasius of Pergamum and his monumental works, he also includes passages from other authors, especially Hippocrates and Galen, with whom he had direct experience, and some knowledge derived from his own medical practice. His texts also include recipes from later compilations, closer in time to his own, such as those of Alexander of Tralles and Pedanios Dioscorides. Additionally, Paul is the first known witness for some medicinal plants. For further information on the sources of Paul of Aegina, see A. ROSELLI, *Paolo Egineta III 17 e le sue fonti. Riflessioni sulla trasformazione dei testi*, in *Histoire de la tradition et édition des médecins grecs - Storia della*

basius, father of Byzantine encyclopaedism, while discussing menstrual pathologies, frequently refers to the science of Hippocrates, which was further developed by Galen, Oribasius' renowned predecessor from Pergamon³². However, his references to treatments aimed at inducing menstruation mostly involve the use of emmenagogue drugs or the surgical procedure of scarification to redirect blood flow, while the coverage of other menstrual disorders is relatively limited³³.

Taking everything into account, in Byzantine 3rd to 7th-century learned medicine the absence of taboos around female blood is evident. Like in the *Hippocratic Corpus*, gynaecological issues are approached in a laic and scientific way, mainly providing therapeutic guidance to restore fertility. The works of these physicians represent a comprehensive and non-judgemental approach to the study of women's health: the lack of biased attitude to-

tradizione e edizione dei medici greci, a cura di V. BOUDON-MILLOT, J. JOUANNA, A. GARZYA, A. ROSELLI, M. D'Auria Editore, Napoli 2010, pp. 231-239.

³² Oribasius emphasizes the importance of maintaining a systematic approach and precise methods, drawing from the fundamental principles and doctrines of Hippocrates, which Galen has followed and for this reason ought to be commended (ταῖς Ἱπποκρατεῖσι ἀρχαῖς καὶ δόξαις ἐξακολουθῶν). See Oribasius' praeface to *Collectiones medicae*, *Oribasii collectionum medicarum reliquiae*, vols. 1-4 (*Corpus medicorum Graecorum*), ed. J. RAEDER, Teubner, Leipzig 1:1928; 2:1929; 3:1931; 4:1933. This approach ensures coherence and consistency in addressing different hypotheses. Regarding the Hippocrates and Galen's influence on the writings of Oribasius of Pergamum, as the topics are condensed here and deserve a specific in-depth analysis, I recommend consulting M. LÓPEZ PÉREZ, *Ginecología y patología sexual femenina en las Colecciones Médicas de Oribasio*, British Archaeological Reports, Oxford 2010.

³³ I provide references to the passages in which Oribasius discusses menstruation: *Collectiones medicae* 7.5.15,22-23; 7.20.1-3; 8.16; 10.23.1-5; 14.63.12-13; 14.65.1-6. However, in agreement with A. TOUWAIDE, *Medicine and Pharmacy*, in *A Companion to Byzantine Science*, ed. L. STAVROS, Brill Academic Pub, Leiden - Boston 2020, pp. 392-393, it is worth noting that Byzantine gynaecology and obstetrics involved not only monitoring the reproductive cycle of women from menarche to menopause and overseeing pregnancy and childbirth, including perinatal care, but also encompassed anticonception practices and abortifacient recipes.

wards menstrual blood in Byzantine erudite medicine is consistent with the broader cultural and social attitudes towards menstruation in the ancient Greek world, where menses are viewed just as a natural bodily process that is essential for procreation. Menstrual blood is not considered a toxic or dangerous substance to others. Rather, their concerns are focused on the accumulation of excessive menstrual blood within a woman's body, which could lead to particular pathological states detrimental to the woman herself; indeed, the regular shedding of menstrual blood is viewed as an essential component of a healthy reproductive system in women, and an interruption or absence of menstruation is often a cause for medical concern.

Shifting Beliefs: From Medical Science to Religious Traditions

However, the situation changes when considering a parallel plane to that of the science of these great authors. Alongside the medicine of these learned men, who compiled monumental encyclopaedias that synthesized the knowledge of preceding centuries, popular medicine must be considered, with its saint physicians and superstitious methods³⁴. Not coincidentally, the depiction of popular religious beliefs in some hagiographies shows a critical attitude towards patients who trust medical practitioners more than the intervention of the saintly figures; this perspective often denounces Hippocrates and Galen as *braggart* (κομπορρήμονες),

³⁴ Byzantine medical literature is vast and includes not only scholarly encyclopaedic works, but also practical handbooks and recipe books, written in the vernacular language, which are far removed from the lingua franca of medical science, modelled on the example of Hippocrates and the learned physicians of earlier generations. See A.M. IERACI BIO, *La letteratura medica bizantina: tipologia di testi*, "Lalies", 27, 2001, pp. 113-130.

as evident in the *Miracles* of Saint Artemius (7th century)³⁵. Later, in the first half of the 12th century, another interesting and similar example comes from a writing attributed to Theodore Prodromos (ca. 1115-1160), which testifies to the decline of medical science in Byzantium and the unflattering judgment of Hippocrates and the Asclepiads. The *Βίων πρᾶσις ποιητικῶν καὶ πολιτικῶν* (*Auction of Poets' and Politicians' Lives*) is the ideal continuation of Lucian of Samosata's homonymous dialogue³⁶. Prodromos imagines the auction of another lot of the lives of famous figures. Upon the order of Zeus, Hermes puts up for sale, among Homer, Euripides, Demosthenes, and Aristophanes, even Hippocrates, estimated at only four minas³⁷, including a scalpel and a cauterizer, who quotes memorable sayings from his works and gives a sample of how to deceive patients with obscure words and the administration of random remedies. After all, if the patient recovers, the credit goes to the physician, and if he dies, it doesn't matter much because the dead cannot accuse him³⁸.

³⁵ "So, where are the arrogant Hippocrates and Galen, and countless other doctors who only seek to appear?" (ποῦ τοίνυν οἱ κομπορήμονες Ἱπποκράται καὶ Γαληνὸς καὶ ἄλλοι μυρῖοι τὸ δοκεῖν ἰατροί;). The Greek text is from the edition of A. PΑΡΑΔΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ-ΚΕΡΑΜΕΥΣ, *Varia graeca sacra*, Kirschbaum, St. Petersburg 1909, p. 34. Artemius is a military saint attributed with miraculous powers.

³⁶ The text has been transmitted by two manuscripts, the *Vaticanus Graecus* 305 (ff. 64^r-69^r), from the 13th century, and the *Ottobonianus Graecus* 466 (ff. 56^r-65^r), from the 17th century, both kept at the Vatican Apostolic Library. See G. MERCATI, P. FRANCHI DE CAVALIERI, *Codices Vaticani Graeci. Tomus I. Codices I-329*, Typis Poliglottis Vaticanis, Roma 1923, pp. 443-450; see also E. Ferron, F. Battaglini, *Codices manuscripti graeci ottoboniani Bibliothecae Vaticanae*, Ex Typographeo Vaticano, Roma 1893, p. 259.

³⁷ Homer is valued at 5 talents, whereas Hippocrates is valued at 4 minas. Since 1 talent is worth 60 minas, Homer is worth 75 times more than Hippocrates. In contrast, Aristophanes is worth so little that he cannot find any buyers.

³⁸ For a full account of the scene of the sale of Hippocrates, refer to the article by M.T. MALATO, F. MARSILI FELICIANGELI, *Decadenza della medicina bizantina nel XII sec. secondo Teodoro Prodromo*, "Pagine di storia della medicina", VI, 1982, pp. 49-60.

In the realm of erudite medical knowledge, sexual intercourse during a woman's menstrual cycle is deemed sterile, as the menstrual blood cleanses away male seed, preventing it from being implanted in the female uterus³⁹. However, in popular belief, sexual intercourse during menstruation becomes a source of potential danger, still believed to be fertile, but with the unfortunate outcome of a child born with leprosy. Diverse facets of Byzantine society, such as popular conceptions of embryogenesis, incorporate elements of the Old Testament into their discourse; furthermore, as will be expounded upon in subsequent sections, this integration extends to Byzantine canon law. In some authors, the 'Christian specificity'⁴⁰ of the text fades away and the Jewish heritage collected by the Christian people emerges forcefully. It is notable how remarkable the phenomenon is: "On ne peut qu'être frappé par l'importance des problématiques vétéro-testamentaires dans certains types de discours byzantins"⁴¹.

This Jewish heritage encompasses two specific prohibitions relating to menstruation. Both derived from the book of *Leviticus*, the first restriction pertains to ritual impurity, whereby women are excluded from worship during their menstrual period and

³⁹ A concise summary of ancient medical theories on the formation of the embryo in the womb of a woman comes from Clement of Alexandria. The embryo is formed by the mixture of sperm with the pure residue left by the menstrual blood at the end of the active menstrual period. The sperm coagulates the blood residue in the same way that rennet coagulates milk during the process of cheese-making. See Clement of Alexandria *Paedagogus* 1.6.48, *Clément d'Alexandrie. Le pédagogue, 3 vols.*, eds. M. HARL, H.-I. MARROU, C. MATRAY [et al.], Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1:1960; 2:1965; 3:1970. See also Hippoc. *Nat. mul.* 8; Hippoc. *Mul.* 1.17. Cf. Arist. *Gen. an.* 727b 12-25. The metaphorical association of biological processes occurring within the human body with cheese curdling is a recurring theme in Greek medical texts. See e.g. Hippoc. *Aër.* 18.4.

⁴⁰ "La spécificité chrétienne": M.-H. CONGOURDEAU, *Corps naissant, corps souffrant. Anthropologie, médecine, épidémies à Byzance*, ACHCByz, Paris 2021, p. 66.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

considered impure for a duration of seven days⁴². The second prohibition concerns sexual intercourses during menstruation: if a man engages in intimate relations with a woman during her impure period, he will also be considered impure and will receive a minimum seven-day sanction⁴³; in more severe cases, both the man and the woman may even face expulsion from the community⁴⁴.

A vivid account on the Levitical prescriptions comes from Theodoret of Cyrrhus (393-ca. 458), which makes evident the relationship between Byzantine Christianity and its Jewish heritage. As the author writes in his commentary on the *Octateuch*:

Why is someone who naturally expels excess blood during menstruation called impure (ἀκάθαρτον)? [...] In order to prevent anyone from joining those who are in such condition, some argue that (φασὶ γὰρ τινες⁴⁵) their union causes the generation of scabies and leprosy, due to the excess blood that damages the bodies in such a way (τοῦ περιττώματος ἐκείνου τὰ διαπλαπτόμενα πημαίνοντος σώματα). For this reason, anyone who joins a woman in this condition is considered impure⁴⁶.

Despite the disparity between early Hippocratic traditions and 5th century Christian asceticism, classical medical conceptions of the body persist throughout late antiquity due to the enduring nature of ancient medical literature. Theodoret, familiar with these traditions, approaches medical and anthropological topics conservatively, offering new ideas as reconfigurations of past science: he acknowledges the authority of Hippocratic and Galenic medicine, while offering his own adaptations, which reflects his Chris-

⁴² See *Leviticus* 15.19.

⁴³ See *Leviticus* 15.24, 18.19.

⁴⁴ See *Leviticus* 20.18.

⁴⁵ “Expression quasi-technique pour introduire une maxime de la médecine populaire”: CONGOURDEAU, *Corps naissant* cit., p. 68.

⁴⁶ Theodoret of Cyrrhus *Quaestiones in Octateuchum* (*Theodreti Cyrensis quaestiones in Octateuchum*, eds. N. FERNÁNDEZ MARCOS, A. SÁENZ-BADILLOS, Poliglota Matritense, Madrid 1979, p. 172).

tian identity⁴⁷. Theodoret has access to collections of medical theories, including Oribasius', and demonstrates profound acquaintance with medical discourses in his treatise *Cure of the Greek Maladies*⁴⁸, which presents a novel understanding of humanity and the divine as a remedy for pagans' misconceptions⁴⁹.

As previously discussed, the Greek medical tradition acknowledges the notion of sterility during sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman⁵⁰. However, this understanding undergoes a significant transformation in Theodoret, shifting towards perceiving such encounters as fraught with danger and entailing a sense of responsibility. This sense of danger arises from the perceived excessiveness of menstrual blood, and it is precisely due to this perception of danger that a menstruating woman is stigmatized as impure, serving as a metaphorical warning signal⁵¹, and sexual intercourses with her result in the birth of children afflicted with leprosy, thus physically manifesting the sign of this impurity. The passage appears to reveal Theodoret insightful medical knowledge. Drawing on the theory of humours, he seems to suggest that the excess blood of a woman, deemed superfluous dur-

⁴⁷ See E. MUEHLBERGER, *Simeon and Other Women in Theodoret's Religious History: Gender in the Representation of Late Ancient Christian Asceticism*, "Journal of Early Christian Studies", XXIII, IV, 2015, pp. 583-606.

⁴⁸ Ὅνομα δὲ τῶ βιβλίῳ Ἑλληνικῶν θεραπευτικῆ παθημάτων (Thdt. *Graecarum affectionum curatio*, preface, 16, *Thérapeutique des maladies helléniques*, ed. P. CANIVET, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1958). The title alone speaks volumes: Emperor Julian had stated that Christianity is an illness (νόσος) that affects intelligence; Theodoret turns the accusation back on the sender: the true sick ones are the pagans, and the symptoms of their illness are vanity (ἀλαζονεία) and arrogance (οἰσίς), stemming from their ignorance of the evangelical truth. See CANIVET, *Thérapeutique* cit., pp. 42-47.

⁴⁹ In this treatise, Theodoret explicitly recognizes the expertise and authority of Hippocrates and Galen in the realm of human body knowledge, while also noting that much has been written by other prominent figures such as Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Theophrastus, and numerous others (καὶ μῦριοις ἑτέροις): Thdt. *Affect.* 5.82.1-10.

⁵⁰ See *supra* note 18 and note 39.

⁵¹ CONGOURDEAU, *Corps naissant* cit., p. 68.

ing the period of heavy menstruation, coagulates when mixed with male sperm, forming an embryo that, in its foetal state, will externally exhibit signs of leprosy. These signs indicate an excess of blood in contrast to the ideal balance of the four humours: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Moreover, preceding medical traditions already associates leprosy with an improper mixture and imbalance of humours. According to Galen, the disease originates from an accumulation of excessive black bile within the veins. In the case of leprosy, this surplus black bile is not effectively eliminated and instead rises to the skin's surface, affecting the entire body; later, also Paul of Aegina conveys the same idea that leprosy finds its roots in an abundance of black bile, or in the corruption of this humour due to yellow bile⁵².

Furthermore, during his episcopate in Cyrrhus, Theodoret directly combats the Marcionite heresy. His letters recount the conversion of a thousand followers of Marcion who are active within his diocese⁵³, as well as the conversion of a notable eight villages inhabited by Marcionites⁵⁴. The commendation of the Jewish law in biblical exegesis can be understood within the framework of a broader objective, which is to safeguard the scriptural text against the assaults launched by adherents of this heretical movement, who reject the Old Testament in its entirety. These praises “sont

⁵² The last one is the most severe form of the disease. See T.S. MILLER, J.W. NESBITT, *Walking Corpses. Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY) - London 2014, p. 65.

⁵³ Thdt. *Epistulae* 113 (*Théodoret de Cyr: Correspondance III*, ed. Y. AZÉMA, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1965). It is interesting that Theodoret refers to the Marcionite heresy as a ‘disease’ (Μαρκίωνος νόσος), thereby implying the need for a remedy. In *Ep.* 146, he speaks of Μαρκίωνος λύμη, that is ‘the harm of Marcion’ (cf. Hippoc. *Fract.* 3.18); in the same epistle, he even mentions the ‘Marcion’s filth’ (Μαρκίωνος σηπεδών): the term σηπεδών, used in the plural, refers to the putrefaction of bodily humours in Hippoc. *Aphorismi* 3.16.2, *Hippocrate: Serment. Loi. Testament*, ed. J. JOUANNA, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2019 (repr. Paris 2021). Theodoret’s prose is interwoven with references to medical terminology.

⁵⁴ Thdt. *Epist.* 81.

un point focal de la façon dont les Byzantins se situent par rapport au judaïsme”⁵⁵.

In the extensive epistolary production of Isidore of Pelusium (370-449), whose letters circulate in Byzantium in numbered and organized collections already by the time of Severus of Antioch⁵⁶, references to the Mosaic law and its prescribed regulations are not lacking. Particularly, in a letter addressed to the presbyter Valens, Isidore adopts a position similar to that of Theodoret of Cyrrihus regarding sexual relations with a woman during her active menstrual period: the Mosaic law imposes restrictions on pleasures, and it acts as a restraint against excesses; however, many engage in intercourse with women when it is not permitted, and from these untimely sexual encounters, deformed offspring afflicted with leprosy are born⁵⁷.

Similarly, in the narrative of one of the healing miracles performed by the *anargyroi* of Egypt, Cyrus and John, Sophronius the Sophist (ca. 560-638) explicitly highlights the connection between lust and leprosy. “He equates Old Testament leprosy (tsa’arath) with incurable Elephant Disease, probably common in seventh-century (AD) Egypt and Palestine”⁵⁸, and he suggests that Moses expels individuals affected by elephantiasis from the camp of Israel as a means to purge them of their uncontrolled passions⁵⁹; additionally, he observes that men often contracted

⁵⁵ CONGOURDEAU, *Corps naissant* cit., p. 67.

⁵⁶ See P. ÉVIEUX, *Isidore de Péluse: Lettres 1241-1413. Tome I*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1997, pp. 106-110.

⁵⁷ Isidore of Pelusion *Epistulae* 1489, *Isidore de Péluse: Lettres 1414-1700. Tome II*, ed. P. ÉVIEUX, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2000.

⁵⁸ MILLER, NESBITT, *Walking Corpses* cit., p. 40.

⁵⁹ See *Leviticus* 13. Elephantiasis is characterized by extreme swelling of body parts due to obstruction of the lymphatic system. Curiously, elephantiasis can affect the male genitalia, resulting in a visible and physically distressing manifestation. Within the context of *Leviticus* and its prohibitions related to human behavior and passions, the occurrence of elephantiasis affecting the male genitalia can be interpreted symbolically. The extreme swelling and disfigurement

the disease through sexual relations with women during menstruation. In this narrative, elephantiasis is portrayed as a form of punishment inflicted upon those who lacked self-control in their actions, rather than being a consequence suffered by their children from illicit unions⁶⁰.

Normative Development and Shared Perspectives: Byzantine Views on Menstrual Impurity in Canon Law

The positions mentioned are not isolated within their respective contexts. Through an analysis of both preceding and subsequent sources, an intertextuality becomes evident, which not only confirms a harmony of opinions among Christian writers, but also highlights their dependence on shared Jewish sources and, potentially, a mutual influence in the treatment of this subject matter. On multiple occasions, a close parallelism can be observed between the expression and recurring terms found in passages by authors addressing the issue of female menstrual flow and of the nature of the blood that flows from women. Simultaneously, no oscillation is recorded on the argumentative plane, which consistently remains aligned in the intention to demonstrate the same thesis: Levitical precepts impose caution regarding female menstrual blood and engaging in sexual intercourse with women during active menstruation.

In tracing a historical retrospective on the topic, Saint Dionysius († 264), the Patriarch of Alexandria, emerges as “the first Christian leader on record”⁶¹ to invoke the prohibition of menstruating

resulting from elephantiasis may be perceived as a tangible punishment for what *Leviticus* deems as prohibited or excessive passions.

⁶⁰ Sophronius of Jerusalem *Miracula Cyri et Iohannis (Los thaumata de Sofronio. Contribución al estudio de la ‘Incubatio’ cristiana*, ed. N. FERNÁNDEZ MARCOS, Instituto Antonio de Nebrija, Madrid Madrid 1975).

⁶¹ W.E. PHIPPS, *The Menstrual Taboo in the Judeo-Christian Tradition*, “Journal of Religion and Health”, XIX, IV, 1980, p. 300.

women approaching the altar and partaking in the Eucharist⁶²; notably, the ecclesiastical councils of Laodicea⁶³ (363-364) and *in Trullo*⁶⁴ (held in Constantinople, in 692) uphold Dionysius' trustworthy judgment. Furthermore, the authority of his statement transcends the centuries, as evidenced by Matthew Blastares (14th century), a Byzantine Greek monk of Thessaloniki, who, in his lexicon (*Σύνταγμα κατά στοιχείων*), records the opinion of the Alexandrine Saint regarding the prohibition of menstruating women from participating in the liturgy. He supplements this viewpoint with a Gospel illustration: indeed, the bleeding woman does not venture to make direct contact with Christ, but only touches the hem of his garment⁶⁵.

In Blastares' text, a remarkable observation emerges. It not only encompasses the opinion passed down by ecclesiastical discipline, which has been observed to endure among various authors of Byzantine Christianity, but also includes a citation of the secular legislation enacted by the Byzantine Emperor Leo VI the Wise (866-912)⁶⁶, which revolves around the administration of sacraments to post-partum women and new-borns, even before the time prescribed by Levitical regulations. The core issue centres around the purification period after childbirth.

In his important role as a legislator, Leo VI seeks to provide regulatory stability to issues that are perceived as problematic. In a response to Stephen, his brother, Bishop of Constantinople and Ecumenical Patriarch, Leo VI offers his own interpretation on a

⁶² *Ibidem*.

⁶³ Canon 44. The acts of the synod of Laodicea on this subject are mentioned by Matthew Blastares in *Collectio alphabetica* Gamma 22 (G. RHALLES, M. POTLES, *Σύνταγμα τῶν θείων καὶ ἱερῶν κανόνων τῶν τε ἁγίων καὶ πανευφίμων ἀποστόλων, καὶ τῶν ἱερῶν οἰκουμενικῶν καὶ τοπικῶν συνόδων, καὶ τῶν κατὰ μέρος ἁγίων πατέρων*, vol. 6, Εκ τῆς Τυπογραφίας Γ. Χαρτοφύλακος, Athens 1859).

⁶⁴ Canon 2.

⁶⁵ Matt. Blast. *Collectio alphabetica* Alpha 16.1-17; cf. New Testament *Matthew* 9.20-22; *Mark* 5.25-34; *Luke* 8.43-48.

⁶⁶ Matt. Blast. *Collectio alphabetica* Alpha 16.18-26.

topic that, up to that point, had not been regulated by either canon law or secular law⁶⁷: the administration of sacraments to post-partum women and new-borns, even before the time prescribed by Levitical regulations. Leo VI promulgates this imperial constitution⁶⁸: a post-partum woman, if healthy, observes a purification period of forty days before receiving the sacraments again, as mandated by *Leviticus*⁶⁹, unless her life is in danger⁷⁰; the same provision applies to new-borns awaiting baptism: they must wait for forty days⁷¹, but, in cases of necessity, the christening can be administered even on the eighth day, or even before this period, if the life of the new-born is in mortal danger⁷². A life-threatening situation grants an exception to the established habit, enabling both the mother and the child to receive the sacraments earlier than what would be conventionally allowed⁷³. Indeed, the matter of post-partum purification is widely acknowledged, as evidenced by numerous prayers within the liturgical tradition of the Greek

⁶⁷ Αὕτη ἐξεφωνήθη ὑπὲρ οὗ νόμος οὐκ ἦν οὐδὲ κανὼν (Leo VI Sapiens *Novellae* 17.3, P. NOAILLES, A. DAIN, *Les nouvelles de Léon VI le Sage*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1944).

⁶⁸ διάταξις ἐκφέρομεν (Leo VI Sapiens *Novellae* 17.10).

⁶⁹ See *Leviticus* 12.1-8. After giving birth to a male child, the book of *Leviticus* prescribes a period of seven days for purification, similar to the purification period after menstruation (*Leviticus* 15.19). Additionally, thirty-three days are to be observed, which is the time between childbirth and the first menstrual cycle following pregnancy. If the new-born is female, the prescribed times are doubled.

⁷⁰ Leo VI Sapiens *Novellae* 17.30-42.

⁷¹ “Forty, as the days in which the formation [of the foetus] is completed in the natural and maternal dwelling (i.e. the womb)” (Leo VI Sapiens *Novellae* 17.59-61). Here, Leo VI cites a common belief about the development of the foetus in the womb that is already present in Hippoc. *De septimestri partu* 9.31-35 (LITTRÉ, *Oeuvres complètes d’Hippocrate. Volume 7* cit.).

⁷² Leo VI Sapiens *Novellae* 17.57-70.

⁷³ “This compromise was again confirmed by the canonical answer of Nikolaos III Grammatikos (1084-1111)” (E.M. SYNEK, *The Reception of Old Testament Purity Prescriptions by Byzantine Canon Law*, in *Christian and Islamic Gender Models in Formative Traditions*, ed. K.E. BØRRESEN, Herder, Rome 2004, p. 190).

Church, which considers impure not only the mother and the new-born, but also the midwives who assists in the delivery, due to their contact with the fluids of the puerperal woman. As a matter of fact, the Byzantine *Euchologia* not only document purifying prayers for the mother and child, to be recited both on the day of birth and forty days thereafter, but also for the midwife and other attending women⁷⁴, seeking their relief from the contamination associated with the blood and, most likely, amniotic fluid. As it is explicitly recited:

For you have said, Lord, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it”⁷⁵ [...], forgive your servant who is present here and the entire family, in which the child was born, as well as those who have touched her⁷⁶.

A key aspect to underscore is that, in Mosaic law, the impurity does not stem from the act of childbirth *per se*, but rather from the post-partum blood flows, carrying within them the very essence of life (*nephesh*), which irreversibly contaminate the woman and the offspring⁷⁷. Thus, “a woman suffering from any blood discharge, whether it be puerperal discharge, menstruation, or some other malady⁷⁸, is presumed to be losing life”⁷⁹: considering things from this perspective, it becomes evident how the blood

⁷⁴ *Euchologion*, pp. 261-271 (*Euchologion sive Rituale Graecorum*, ed. J. GOAR, Ex. Typographia Bartholomaei Javarina, Venice 1730).

⁷⁵ *Genesis* 9.1.

⁷⁶ *Euchologion*, p. 262. Cf. C. RAPP, E. AFENTOULIDOU, D. GALADZA [et al.], *Byzantine Prayer Books as Sources for Social History and Daily Life*, “Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik”, I, 2018, pp. 173-212.

⁷⁷ On this issue, see C.E. FONROBERT, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*, Stanford University Press, Redwood City, 2000.

⁷⁸ See *Leviticus* 12.4-5, 15.19-24, 15.25-30.

⁷⁹ G.J. WENHAM, *Why Does Sexual Intercourse Defile (Lev. 15,18)?*, “ZAW”, XCV, 1983, p. 434.

flows could have been regarded as evocative an “aura of death”⁸⁰. Accordingly, Leo VI adds an interesting clause, attempting to find a practical rationale within the Levitical prohibitions regarding female blood. It would be, in fact, a

Regulation of Providence to protect new-borns from leprosy⁸¹. Indeed, since everything superfluous in nature is also harmful, and this [menstrual] blood is superfluous, the Law recommends that those in this condition spend this time in impurity [...], to prevent the living being from deriving its substance from useless and corrupted matter (ὑλης)⁸².

Just as Theodoret of Cyrhus asserts that the negative character of menstrual blood, which by nature must be expelled, derives from its superfluity, so does Leo VI concur with this view: in both the authors, the connection between menstrual blood and the generation of offspring afflicted with leprosy is extremely close. In this case, the commentary by Congourdeau is pertinent: “On aura remarqué que l’opinion populaire selon laquelle l’enfant des règles naît lépreux a complètement évincé l’affirmation médicale sur la stérilité du temps des règles”⁸³. Equally, Zias provides valuable insights into the perplexing correlation observed between leprosy and sexual activity with women during their menstrual period in Byzantium, by highlighting the “obsessive concern”⁸⁴ surrounding this disease in Byzantine society and its association with a specific sexual context. Certainly, the *Old Testament* pro-

⁸⁰ A.S. ROMANO, *Purità ed impurità tra ebraismo e tradizioni sinottiche. Casi di impurità corporale*, diss., Università degli Studi di Napoli ‘Federico II’, supervisor Ch.mo Prof. M. Del Verme, a. y. 2007-2008, p. 39.

⁸¹ The term mentioned in the text is λώβη (Leo VI Sapiens *Novellae* 17.50), which in Galen refers to a type of leprosy (see *De Prop. Animi* Kühn volume 5.14.12).

⁸² ἐξ ἀχρήστου καὶ διεφθαρμένης ὑλης. In Sor. 1.23-25, what is secreted by the body is addressed as ὑλη. The text is from Leo VI Sapiens *Novellae* 17.50-56.

⁸³ CONGOURDEAU, *Corps naissant* cit., p. 68.

⁸⁴ J. ZIAS, *Lust and Leprosy: Confusion or Correlation?*, “Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research”, CCLXXV, 1989, p. 27.

vides an aetiological explanation of leprosy⁸⁵, and gives indications regarding diagnostic methods, but the pathology is never explicitly linked to menstrual blood. Instead, as previously mentioned, prescriptions and restrictions are provided concerning the presumed menstrual impurity. Only the rabbinic literature (first to 5th century AD) associates leprosy with the realm of sexuality:

Who causes a new-born child to be leprous? Its mother, who did not observe her period of separation⁸⁶.

If a man sleeps with his wife during her menstrual period, the offspring of such a coitus will be leprous⁸⁷.

The association between leprosy and sexual intercourse during menstruation can be understood as a means of preventing the violation of Mosaic prescriptions of ritual purity, stating severe consequences for those who engage in such forbidden unions. These assertions themselves give rise to an expansion of Jewish law in several Byzantine authors, such as Aeneas of Gaza⁸⁸ († 518) and ps.-John the Faster († 595), who state that the law of Moses mandates the execution of the father of the leper⁸⁹ because he had not respected the period of menstrual impurity of his wife. These assertions, which lack correspondence in the *Old Testament*, and transform a precautionary behaviour into a guilt-inducing prohibition, may derive from the already mentioned rabbinic literature, and particularly from the *Talmud*⁹⁰.

⁸⁵ *Leviticus* 13.

⁸⁶ The references to rabbinic literature are owed to ZIAS, *Lust and Leprosy* cit., p. 28.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁸ Aeneas of Gaza *Theophrastus* 30-31 (*Enea di Gaza: Teofrasto*, ed. E. COLONNA, S. Iodice, Naples 1958).

⁸⁹ τῶν Ἑβραίων τὸν νόμον [...], ὃς τοῦ λελωβημένου τὸν πατέρα κατέλευσε (Aen. G. *Theophrastus* 30.22-23).

⁹⁰ See CONGOURDEAU, *Corps naissant* cit., pp. 68-69.

Something singular, and certainly different from the sources examined thus far, despite the consonance in the qualitative judgment on female impurity derived from menstruation, is found in the Byzantine Neoplatonist Damascius (ca. 450-532). His *Life of Isidore*⁹¹, which is preserved in an epitome in Photius' *Bibliotheca* (9th century) and in fragments in the *Suda* (10th century), recounts some episodes featuring the Egyptian Heraiscus, another Neoplatonist (evtl. 5th century). Heraiscus, portrayed almost as a charismatic figure, also arouses admiration from Proclus (412-485): "It is said that Proclus admired Heraiscus' skill more than his own: what Proclus knew, Heraiscus also knew, but what was known only to Heraiscus was unknown to Proclus"⁹². "Extremely astute in intuition"⁹³, a heightened sensitivity to natural phenomena causes him suffering: if he hears the voice of an impure woman, he experiences a strong headache, and considers it a sign of menstruation⁹⁴.

As a matter of fact, ancient Levitical injunctions on female issues are inherited by Christianity, starting from Dionysius of Alexandria, and generally accepted from the 4th century councils onwards⁹⁵. However, the traditional position is only made norma-

⁹¹ Isidore (ca. 4th to 5th century) is the scholar who preceded Damascius in leading the Academy of Athens.

⁹² Photius *Bibliotheca*, codex 242, 343 b, ll. 2-4 (*Photius. Bibliothèque*, 8 vols., ed. R. HENRY, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1:1959; 2:1960; 3:1962; 4:1965; 5:1967; 6:1971; 7:1974; 8:1977).

⁹³ Malchus of Philadelphia *Fragmenta* 4* (*Malco di Filadelfia. Frammenti*, ed. L.R. CRESCI, Bibliopolis, Naples 1982). The *Suda* presents the exact wording of the fragment (see Eta 451, *Suidae lexicon*, 4 vols, ed. A. ADLER, Teubner, Leipzig, 1:1928; 2:1931; 3:1933; 4:1935).

⁹⁴ καὶ τοῦτο σημεῖον ἐποιεῖτο τῆς ἀφεδρείας (*Suda* Alpha 4573, ed. ADLER 1928-1935). Cf. Pht. *Bibliotheca*, codex 242, 343 a, ll. 24-26. Cf. D. SHANZER, *Merely a Cynic Gesture?*, "Rivista di Filologia e di Istruzione Classica", CXIII (1985), pp. 61-66.

⁹⁵ The *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a Christian text from the first half of the 3rd c., presents an exception within Christian sources regarding menstruation. It views menstrual flow just as a natural process, thus negating the necessity to observe any restrictions imposed by Jewish law. See V. RAGUCCI, *Didascalia Apostolo-*

tive in Byzantium by Leo VI in the 9th and 10th centuries. Indeed, while the *Canons* of Ps.-Hippolytus (4th century) provide similar provisions regarding women who have just given birth (with the addition of prescriptions for midwives as well, considering them impure due to their contact with the parturient woman's fluids)⁹⁶, this legislative collection has been included in the Coptic canonical collection, rather than the Byzantine one⁹⁷. Thus, the initiative undertaken by Leo VI represents the initial official endeavour in Byzantium to establish normative adjustments regarding the matter of female purity.

This imperial decree of Leo VI is recalled by the canonist Theodore Balsamon (12th century), in his commentary on the 2nd canon of Dionysius of Alexandria⁹⁸. Following the onset of menarche, women are deemed ineligible to approach the altar or be granted entry into the clergy, as per Balsamon's perspective. The role of deaconesses is also withheld from them due to the occurrence of menstruation. Additionally, two centuries later, this position is reiterated by Matthew Blastares: evoking a practice that has since fallen into disuse, he recalls the role of deaconesses, whom some argue were "tasked with assisting women who were being baptized, as it was not permissible for men to see these women naked during the baptism"⁹⁹; according to others, however, they had no different prerogatives than male deacons¹⁰⁰. Nev-

rum: *testo siriano, traduzione italiana, sinossi e commento sulla formazione del testo*, diss., Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, supervisor Ch.mo Prof. M. Pesce, 2013, p. 34; see also E.M. SYNEK, 'Wer aber nicht völlig rein ist an Seele und Leib...'. *Reinheitstabus im Orthodoxen Kirchenrecht*, Kovar, Egling 2006, p. 108.

⁹⁶ Pseudo-Hippolytus of Rome *Canones* 18 (P. BRADSHAW, C. BEBAWY, *The Canons of Hippolytus*, Gorgias Press, Piscataway 2010, p. 20).

⁹⁷ See SYNEK, *The Reception of Old Testament* cit., p. 190.

⁹⁸ See DAIN, NOIALLES, *Les nouvelles de Léon VI* cit., p. 62.

⁹⁹ Matt. Blast. *Collectio alphabetica* Gamma 11.69-72.

¹⁰⁰ Matt. Blast. *Collectio alphabetica* Gamma 11.72-74.

ertheless, they were prohibited from accessing the sacred altar “due to the inexorable menstrual flow”¹⁰¹.

Balsamon discusses the duration of a woman's menstrual cycle, usually lasting up to seven days. During this time, he asserts that menstruating women are forbidden from participating in baptism, receiving the Eucharist, or entering the main part of the church. Balsamon expresses concern about instances where menstruating women attend liturgical celebrations in the narthex (πρόναος) of the church. He suggests treating these narthexes as a separate area, not integral to the church, possibly like a “glorified cloak-room”¹⁰².

Conclusion

The exploration of gynaecological theories in the Hippocratic Corpus emphasizes ancient physicians' scientific efforts to understand the female body and its health. Menstruation is recognized as vital for women's reproductive functions and well-being without negative associations seen in later popular and religious beliefs. Byzantine physicians, influenced by Hippocratic traditions, continue to prioritize scientific observation and treatment. While Aëtius of Amida and Paul of Aegina offer valuable insights into

¹⁰¹ διὰ τὴν τῶν ἐμμήνων ἀπροαίρετον ῥύσιν (Matt. Blast. *Collectio alphabetica* Gamma 11.76-77).

¹⁰² The quotation is from VISCUSO 2005, p. 322, who provides an accurate account of Theodore Balsamon's observations. When examining the attitude towards menstruating women in Byzantine canonical sources, refer also to P. VISCUSO, *Menstruation: A Problem in Late Byzantine Canon Law*, “Byzantine Studies”, IV, 1999; P. VISCUSO, *Cleanliness, Not a Condition for Godliness: Alousia as a Canonical Requirement in Late Byzantium*, “Greek Orthodox Theological Review”, XLVI, 2001, pp. 75-88; E.M. SYNEK, *On gendering purity: Geschlechtsspezifische Vorstellungen und Vorschriften über rein und unrein*, in *Biblische Frauenfiguren in der Spätantike*, eds. A. SIQUANS, M. VINZENT, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2022, pp. 210-241.

gynaecology, popular medicine and religious beliefs sometimes differ from these approaches.

Within Byzantine Christianity, a strong connection between menstrual blood and leprosy emerges, possibly influenced by Jewish interpretations of Levitical laws. Christian writers like Theodoret of Cyrrhus and Isidore of Pelusium promote abstaining from sexual intercourse during menstruation to avoid giving birth to leprous offspring. Emperor Leo VI even legislates on the matter, offering practical justifications based on the perceived superfluity of menstrual blood.

Despite some differences, a consensus within Byzantine Christianity emphasizes the impurity associated with menstruation and the importance of adhering to Levitical regulations. Early leaders, such as Dionysius of Alexandria, initiated the prohibition of menstruating women from approaching the altar, later enshrined in Byzantine canon law by Leo VI. This understanding persists through the works of later Byzantine canonists like Theodore Balsamon and Matthew Blastares.

The Byzantine perception of menstrual blood results from a combination of medical knowledge, religious beliefs, and influences from Jewish traditions. The association with leprosy and the incorporation of Levitical precepts contribute to the perception of menstrual impurity in Byzantine society, shaping religious practices and cultural attitudes towards women's reproductive functions.

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