

Doctor wives of physicians in the Roman Empire: an example of equality?

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Summary

In the essay are compared two epitaphs in Greek (respectively 1st-2nd and 4th-6th century AD): a physician praises his wife for her medical knowledge. The social context and religious faith profoundly affect the image of the deceased woman.

Riassunto

Nel saggio sono messi a confronto due epitaffi in greco (rispettivamente I-II e IV-VI secolo d.C.), in cui un medico elogia la moglie per le sue conoscenze mediche. Il contesto sociale e la fede religiosa incidono profondamente sull'immagine della defunta.

Keywords: physicians, wives, history of medicine, inscriptions, Roman Empire, paganism, Christianity

Parole chiave: medici, mogli, storia della medicina, iscrizioni, Impero Romano, paganesimo, Cristianità

The purpose of this essay is to examine two pairs of doctors attested epigraphically in Greek language between the 1st and 6th centuries AD and to understand both the importance of the exercise of medical art from the descriptions provided by the spouses and the role played by deceased wives in their communities in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) during Roman imperial age. This study also allows to compare two different approaches from the point of view of professional ethics: if in the first imperial age (1st-2nd AD) a physician like Galen could replace the so-called “hippocratic triangle” (patient-doctor-disease) with the patient-doctor “couple”, in the centuries of Late Antiquity (4th-6th AD), however, the spread of Christianity polarized the attention on a single element of this “couple”, the patient.

The first case under investigation concerns an inscription in elegant elegiac couplets engraved by Glýkon for his wife Pántheia¹. The epitaph is cut on an altar (Fig. 1, side B) datable to the 1st-2nd century AD and found in Pergamum (now Bergama), near the famous shrine dedicated to the god Asclepius (Fig. 1 side A): “Goodbye, Pántheia, (my) wife, from (your) husband, I who, because of your destiny, suffer the immense pain of a devastating loss. In fact, Hera ‘who presides over unions’ no longer saw such a wife in terms of beauty and prudent wisdom. You yourself gave birth to children all similar (to me), you always took care of spouse and offspring and you straightened the helm of domestic life and you kept up the common good name of the medical art,

¹ M. FRÄNKEL, *Die Inschriften von Pergamon*, II, W. Spemann, Berlin 1895, pp. 362-366, Nr. 576, side B=IGRR IV 507b= É. SAMAMA, *Les médecins dans le monde grec. Sources épigraphiques sur la naissance d'un corps médical*, Droz, Genève 2003, pp. 310-311, nr. 188 (height 1.05 × 0.35 and 0.37 m, width and thickness without frame at the top and bottom, broken in two pieces, currently at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin). Different dates in S. VENEZIANI, *Le donne-medico di età ellenistica nelle documentazioni epigrafiche*, “*Medicina nei secoli*”, 21(3), 2009, pp. 1123-1136, 1131-1133 (end of 1st AD); E. KÜNZL, *Medica. Die Ärztin*, Nünnerich-Asmus Verlag, Mainz am Rhein 2013, pp. 97-98 e Abb. 43 (2nd AD).

and you were not lacking in my art, despite being a woman. For this reason the husband Glýkon built for you a sepulcher, which indeed houses the remains of the immortal Philádelphos, where I too will be laid when I die, buried under the same sod as I was splendidly sympathetic with you appropriately” (Author’s translation).

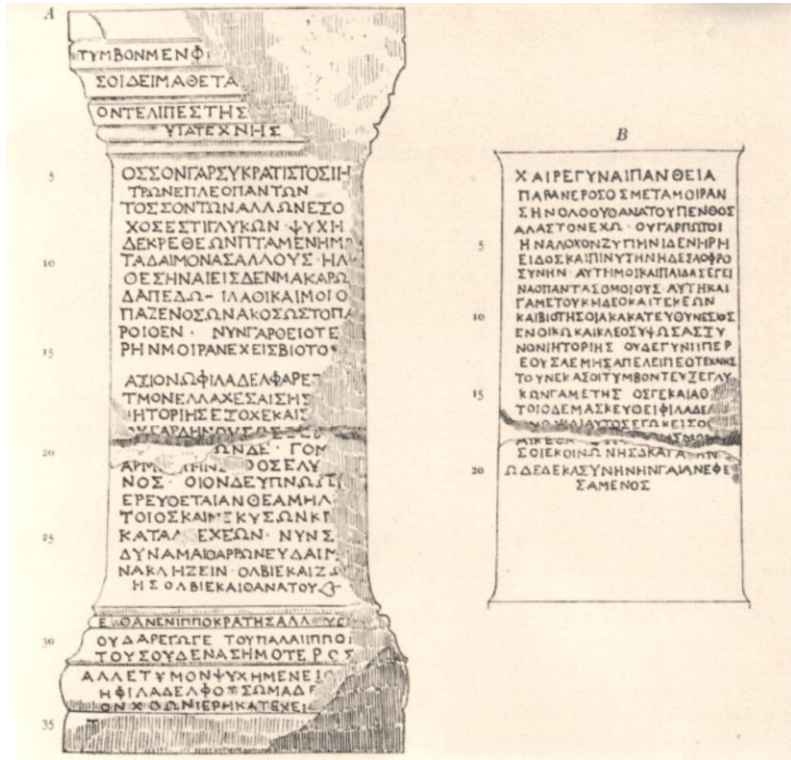


Fig. 1a - Apograph of the altar of Pergamum, sides A and B (from FRÄNKEL, 363, Nr. 576).

χαίρε, γύναι Πάνθεια, | παρ'άνερος, δε μετὰ μοῖραν |
 σὴν ὀλοοῦ θανάτου πένθος | ἄλαστον ἔχω.
 Οὐ γάρ πω τοί-|ην ἄλοχον Ζυγίη ἴδεν Ἥρη |
 εἶδος καὶ πινυτὴν ἠδὲ σαοφρο-|σύνην.
 Αὐτὴ μοι καὶ παῖδας ἐγεί-|ναο πάντας ὁμοίους,
 αὐτὴ καὶ | γαμέτου κήδεο καὶ τεκέων |
 καὶ βιοτῆς οἶακα καθευθύνεσκες | ἐν οἴκῳ
 καὶ κλέος ὑψώσας ξυ-|νὸν ἱστορίας,
 οὐδὲ γυν-|κῆ περ | εὐῶσα ἐμῆς ἀπολείπεο τέχνης. |
 Τοῦνεκά σοι τύμβον τεῦξε Γλύ-|κων γαμέτης,
 ὅς γε καὶ ἀθ[ανά]-|τοιο δέμας κεύθει Φιλαδέλ[φου], |
 [ἔ]νθ[α] καὶ αὐτὸς ἐγὼ κείσομ[αι], | αἶ κε θά[νω],
 ὡς [ἀγλα]ῖσμὸν [ζῶν] | σοι ἐκοινώνησα κατ'αἰ[σ]αν, |
 ὧδε δὲ κατὰ ξυνην γαῖαν ἐφε[σ]-|σάμενος.

Fig. 1b - Transcription of the altar of Pergamum, sides A and B (from FRÄNKEL, 363, Nr. 576).

As shown by the mention of Héra Zugýe at l. 5, it is certainly a pagan context in which Glýkon and Pántheia appear to be equal in terms of profession, but within the family the virtues of the bride are the ability to generate individuals similar to the husband, watching over the children, holding the helm of the house. Only in the close of the epitaph the ability of Pántheia to raise the glory of medicine is praised, because, “despite being a woman”, she was not inferior to her husband in the medical art (ll. 12-13). Pántheia, therefore, had to be quite known and appreciated in her work environment as in her home and belonged, together with her husband, to the opulent urban elite of Pergamum. The ways in which Glýkon and Pántheia learned the medical art are not clear: an inscription on the other side (side A) of the altar honors the doctor Philádelphos², but it is difficult to reconstruct the relationship of discipleship with the two spouses: Philádelphos may have

² FRÄNKEL, *Die Inschriften* cit., pp. 362-366, Nr. 576, side A=IGRR IV 507a=SAMAMA, *Les médecins dans le monde grec* cit., pp. 308-310, nr. 187.

been Glýkon's father or teacher, or even Pántheia's father³. In fact, the first four lines of the epitaph for Philádelphos read as follows: "this tomb, Philádelphos, was built for you by your colleague Glýkon, whom you left when he became worthy of your art; how much indeed you were the most powerful of all the doctors, so much so that Glýkon is superior to all the others" (Author's translation). In any case, in this "extended family"⁴ it seems interesting to point out that Glýkon – the *trait d'union* between Philádelphos and Pántheia because he is the author of the two epitaphs inscribed in the same altar – proudly wants to remember that he was "worthy of your [of Philádelphos] art" (side A, l. 2) and "maintained the common [of Glýkon and Pántheia] good name of the medical art... my [of Glýkon] art" (side B, ll.

³ H.W. PLEKET, *Epigraphica II. Texts on the Social History of the Greek World*, Brill, Leiden 1969, pp. 32-33, nr. 20; A. KRUG, *Heilkunst und Heilkult. Medizin in der Antike*, C.H. Beck, München 1985, trad. it. *Medicina nel mondo classico*, Giunti, Firenze 1990, p. 210; G.L. IRBY-MASSIE, *Women in Ancient Science*, in *Woman's Power, Man's Game. Essays on Classical Antiquity in Honor of Joy K. King*, eds. J.K. KING, M. DEFOREST, Bolchazy-Carducci, Wauconda 1993, pp. 354-372, 366; H.N. PARKER, *Women Doctors in Greece, Rome, and the Byzantine Empire*, in *Women Healers and Physicians. Climbing a Long Hill*, ed. L.R. FURST, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington 1997, pp. 131-150, 140, nr. 5; SAMAMA, *Les médecins dans le monde grec* cit., pp. 310-311, nr. 188; V. NUTTON, *Rhodiapolis and Alliano: two missing links in the history of the hospital*, "Early Christianity", 5(3), 2014, pp.371-389, 386; E. WAINWRIGHT, *Women Healing/Healing Women: The Genderisation of Healing in Early Christianity*, Routledge, London Oakville 2017, p. 53: all these scholars considered Philádelphos father of Glýkon. C. NISSEN, *Prosopographie des médecins de l'Asie Mineure pendant l'Antiquité classique. I. Catalogue des médecins*, Thèse de Doctorat, Paris 2006, p. 112, nr. 59, emphasized the relationship of discipleship between the two doctors. J. IRVING, *Restituta: The Training of the Female Physician*, "Melbourne Historical Journal: Classical Re-Conceptions", 40(2), 2013, pp. 44-56, 53-54 finally thought that Pántheia was the daughter and pupil of Philádelphos.

⁴ V. NUTTON, *The medical meeting-place*, in *Ancient medicine in its socio-cultural context*, eds. P.J. VAN DER EIJK, H.F.J. HORSTMANSHOFF, P.H. SCHRIJVERS, Papers read at the congress held at Leiden University, 13-15 April 1992, vol. 1, Rodopi, Amsterdam - Atlanta GA, 1995, pp. 3-27, 18.

11-13). Glýkon therefore feels very strongly the handover from the *hetairoi*, “colleague”, older and belonging to the previous generation, to him who shared with his wife (apparently with excellent results) his art.

A wife of different type is remembered in Gdanmaa (today Çeşmelisebil)⁵, in the remote region of Lykaonia, located in central-southern Asia Minor (Fig. 2): “(I), Aurelius Gaius, archiater, laid a stele for my wife Augusta, ‘female chief physician’ (*archi-atrine*), who gave healing to the bodies of many sick people, for whom Jesus Christ the Savior will reward her” (Author’s translation). This Augusta, honored by the civic doctor Aurelius Gaius with a term that has not been found elsewhere, is namely “female archiater”. The beautiful marble stele, broken in the lower part and adorned with a Greek cross in relief on the frame and a smaller cross before the text, as well as the reference to the Gospel of Mark 6, 3, allow us to consider certainly Christian the couple of chief physicians. The epitaph was sometimes dated to the 3rd-4th⁶, sometimes to the 4th⁷, sometimes even to the 4th-6th century AD⁸.

⁵ *Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua*, VII. *Monuments from Eastern Phrygia*, ed. W.M. CALDER, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1956, p. 119, nr. 566= SAMAMA, *Les médecins dans le monde grec* cit., pp. 442-443, nr. 342 (place of location and size of the stone are not known); cfr. KÜNZL, *Medica. Die Ärztin* cit., pp. 102-103.

⁶ SAMAMA, *Les médecins dans le monde grec* cit., p. 442; NISSEN, *Prosopographie des médecins* cit., pp. 505-506, nr. 320; cfr. p. 507, nr. 321.

⁷ KÜNZL, *Medica. Die Ärztin* cit., pp. 97; 103, Abb. 48; 102; 109.

⁸ V. NUTTON, *Archiatry and the Medical Profession in Antiquity*, “Papers of the British School at Rome”, 45, 1977, pp. 191-226, 219, nr. 24; PARKER, *Women Doctors in Greece, Rome, and the Byzantine Empire* cit., p. 144, nr. 41; R. FLEMMING, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women. Gender, Nature, and Authority from Celsus to Galen*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 390, nr. 28; Ch. SCHULZE, *Medizin und Christentum in Spätantike und frühem Mittelalter. Christliche Ärzte und ihr Wirken*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2005, pp. 235-236; H.N. PARKER, *Women and Medicine*, in *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, eds. S.L. JAMES, S. DILLON, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden - Oxford 2012, pp. 107-124, 123. CH. FLÜGEL, *Spätantike Arztschriften als Spiegel des*



Fig. 2a - Apograph of the stone of Gdanmaa (from *Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua*, 145, nr. 566).

Einflusses des Christentums auf die Medizin, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2006, p. 334; cfr. 293 thinks of a date from 4th-6th or 3rd-4th AD. The epigraph has been the subject of occasional and fast quotations by other modern scholars: L. ROBERT, *L'édition et l'index commenté des épitaphes*, in *Les stèles funéraires de Byzance gréco-romaine*, éd. N. FIRATLI, Adrien Maisonneuve, Paris 1964, p. 177; K.-D. FISCHER, *Zur Entwicklung des ärztlichen Standes im Römischen Kaiserreich*, "Medizinhist J.", 14, 1979, pp. 165-175, 174, note 45; G.H.R. HORSLEY, *New Documents illustrating Early Christianity*, Macquarie University, North Ryde 1982, pp. 16-17; CH. SCHULZE, *Christliche Ärztinnen in der Antike*, in *Ärztetkunst und Gottvertrauen. Antike und mittelalterliche Schnittpunkte von Christentum und Medizin*, hrsgg. ID., S. IHM, Georg Olms, Hildesheim - Zürich - New York 2002, pp. 91-115, 93-94, Nr. 2; cfr. p. 105.

+ Αὐρ. Γάϊος ἀρχι-
 εἰάτρος ἀνέσ-
 τησα εἰστήλην
 θῆ συμβίου μου
 Αὐγούστης, ἀρχι-
 εἰάτρην ἥτις
 πολλῶν σώμα-
 [σι]ν ἀ[ρ]ρώσθων
 [ἴα]σ[ι]ν δέδω-
 [κε, ἥς] δώσι αὐτῆς
 [σ(ωτῆ)ρ Ἰ(ησοῦ)ς Χρ(ιστὸ)ς ἀμ[οι]-
 [βῆ]ν - -]

Fig. 2b - Transcription of the stone of Gdanmaa (from *Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua*, 145, nr. 566).

The term *archieiatros* at ll. 1-2 is well connected to the image of Christ⁹ but also to the figure of Saint Theodore of Sykeon, defined as a doctor and disciple of the “true archiater, that is Christ” in his *Life* written by his disciple George¹⁰. The geographical area and the time span of the *Life* of the saint – namely the Galatia (region of Asia Minor bordering on Lykaonia) of 6th-7th century AD – appear to be quite congruent with the Augusta’s inscription and could suggest that the epigraph dates to the centu-

⁹ I. ORIGEN, in Ps. 6, l. 47, vol. 3, 289; In Jerem. 18, 5, vol. 3, 156; E. KLOSTERMANN, *Origenes Werke*, Teubner, Leipzig 1901; Jerome, Tract. in Marc. 1 (Anecdota Maredsolana, vol. 3, 1, 337, ll. 14-16). In general, see A.S. PEASE, *Medical Allusions in the Works of St. Jerome*, “Harvard Studies in Classical Philology”, 25, 1914, pp. 73-86, 75; G.B. FERNGREN, *Medicine & Health Care in Early Christianity*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2009, p. 104; V. NUTTON, *Ancient Medicine*, Second Edition, Routledge, London - New York 2013, pp. 313, 416, note 106; *Io ti guarirò. Antologia patristica sulla figura di Cristo medico dei corpi e delle anime*, a cura di L. COCO, Abbazia di Praglia, Teolo (PD) 2013.

¹⁰ Georg. Syc. V. Theod. 146; A.J. FESTUGIÈRE, *Vie de Théodore de Sykéon*, Vol. 1, Société des Bollandistes, Brussels 1970, pp. 114-115.

ries immediately following the 4th, at least until the Justinian age (527-565 AD)¹¹. Even in this case it is not explained how Augusta learned medicine, but we can assume that her husband trained her. Ákos Zimonyi stated that “the female *archiatros*, Augusta, may have inherited the title from her husband, and it can be considered as a kind of honorary title”, because of the bad financial situation of the Roman cities during the 3rd-4th AD¹². Samama had instead considered Augusta an official doctor paid by the city like her husband¹³.

If we analyze a passage of the jurist Ulpian, reported in the Digest and regarding the rights of the *ordo decurionum* and those who possess the neighboring lands, we can see that the number of doctors needed for each city is established by the inhabitants themselves. Only these can select the best doctors for probity and skill¹⁴. So, even if Gdanmaa is defined little *choríon*, “village”, in Constantinian epigraphs, it was an episcopal seat from 4th century onwards¹⁵ and may have chosen and paid its esteemed civic physicians.

From this rapid comparison we can draw some considerations: the couples of both pagan and Christian physicians – who lived in different centuries and 620 km apart – are close-knit, respected each other and lived in symbiosis. The poignant words of Glýkon show, however, that husband and wife were not on the same lev-

¹¹ M. CASSIA, *Collegli e coniugi: due archiatri cristiani nell'Anatolia tardoantica*, in *Donne, istituzioni e società tra tardo antico e alto medioevo*, a cura di F. CENERINI, I.G. MASTROROSA, Pensa Multimedia, Lecce-Brescia 2016, pp. 235-260.

¹² Á. ZOMONYI, “*Archiatres id est medicus sapientissimus*”. *Changes in the meaning of the term archiatros in the Roman Empire*, in J. NAGYILLÉS, A. HAJDÚ, G. GELLÉRFI, A.H. BAROODY, S. BAROODY, *Sapiens Ubique Civis. Proceedings of International Conference on Classical Studies*, Szeged Hungary, Budapest 2013; ELTE Eötvös József Collegium 2015, pp. 231-241, 237.

¹³ SAMAMA, *Les médecins dans le monde grec* cit., p. 443, note 49.

¹⁴ Dig. 50, 9, 1.

¹⁵ CASSIA, *Collegli e coniugi* cit., pp. 254-256.

el: the virtues of Pántheia were above all those connected with the home and the family, while those relating to medical art remain in the background.

Only in a Christian environment, therefore, there is a need to “invent” a suitable word, “female archiater”, to depict the partner as identical to her husband: Augusta, of whom there is no mention of domestic virtues, but who is in the afterlife worthy of obtaining the reward from Jesus Christ the Savior for all the good she had done in her city, must have certainly enjoyed a good reputation and a conspicuous wealth accumulated thanks to the profession.