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 Pántheia. 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,

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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).
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 Philádelphos, but it is difficult to reconstruct the relationship of discipleship with the two spouses: Philádelphos may have

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been Glýkon’s father or teacher, or even Pántheia’s father. 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” 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.

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Glýkon therefore feels very strongly the handover from the *hetaíros*, “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-attríne*), 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-4th\(^6\), sometimes to the 4th\(^7\), sometimes even to the 4th-6th century AD\(^8\).

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

+ Αὐρ. Γάιος ἀρχιεἰάτρος ἀνέστησεν ἑστὶν θῆς συμβίου μου Ἀὐγούστης ἀρχιεἰάτρηνα ἣτις φολλὸν σῶμα- ἑαυτοῦ ὑντὸς ἑαυτῆς 
[σιν ἀρ]πόσθων ἔλασσ[ν δέδω-]
[κε, ἢς] δῶσι ἀυτῆς
[σ(ωτῆρ) Ἡ(ησοῦ)]ς Χρ(ιστός)ς ἂμ[οι]-
[βῆν - - -]

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 Christ\(^9\) 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 George\(^10\). 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-


ries immediately following the 4th, at least until the Justinian age (527-565 AD)\textsuperscript{11}. Even in this case it is not explained how Augusta learned medicine, but we can assume that her husband trained her. Ákos Zimonys 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 AD\textsuperscript{12}. Samama had instead considered Augusta an official doctor paid by the city like her husband\textsuperscript{13}.

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 skill\textsuperscript{14}. So, even if Gandmaa is defined little chorión, “village”, in Constantinian epigraphs, it was an episcopal seat from 4th century onwards\textsuperscript{15} and may have chosen and payed 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-

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} M. CASSIA, Colleghi 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. MASTOROSA, Pensa Multimedia, Lecce-Brescia 2016, pp. 235-260.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} SAMAMA, Les médecins dans le monde grec cit., p. 443, note 49.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Dig. 50, 9, 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} CASSIA, Colleghi e coniugi cit., pp. 254-256.
\end{itemize}
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.