

# Female Bodies and Female Practitioners

Edited by  
LENNART LEHMHAUS

*Ancient Cultures of Sciences  
and Knowledge*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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# Female Bodies and Female Practitioners

Gynaecology, Women's Bodies, and Expertise  
in the Ancient to Medieval Mediterranean  
and Middle East

Edited by  
Lennart Lehmhaus

Mohr Siebeck

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*In memory of*  
Christine F. Salazar  
(1952–2021)



Bildquelle: Erika Borbély Hansen

This volume is dedicated to the memory of Christine Salazar, who was a Research Associate on the project from which it has arisen. Christine was involved in the organization of the conference and in the preparation of the book for publication. We are very sad that she did not live to see it in print.

Christine Salazar was born in Vienna, where she studied Ancient History and Italian, and she held a PhD in Classics from the University of Cambridge (1991), where for several years she taught History of Ancient Medicine at the Department for the History and Philosophy of Science. She also worked as a copy-editor and translator for Cambridge University Press and for Brill, where she oversaw the production of the English version of *Der Neue Pauly*. From 2007 to 2011, she held a grant from the Oesterreichische Nationalbank Jubiläumsfonds for the project 'Early Byzantine Medicine – A Sourcebook'. From January 2010 until December 2014, she was a Research Associate on the project 'Towards a Galen in English' at Newcastle University; and from July 2012 onwards, she held a position at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin within the Collaborative Research Center 'Episteme in Motion', where she was Research Associate on the project 'The Transfer of Medical Knowledge in the Encyclopaedic Compilations of Late Antiquity'.

Christine was particularly interested in the practical aspects of ancient medicine and in the relationship between medicine and the military. Her monograph *The Treatment of War Wounds in Graeco-Roman Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2000) is widely regarded as a major contribution to the history of surgery. She also published on the history of medical care in late antiquity and Byzantium, with a particular interest in Paul of Aegina. She was a meticulous scholar, a brilliant linguist commanding a large variety of languages (including Japanese, Chinese and Russian) and a gifted and experienced translator of academic texts. She was a very modest and lovely person and an extraordinarily loyal colleague and friend.

Christine Salazar passed away on 20 October 2021 in the Havelhöhe Krankenhaus in Berlin after a period of illness. Her death came as a shock to many, and she is dearly missed. She left two nearly finished manuscripts, on which she had been working until the very end: scholarly translations (with introduction, notes and glossaries) of Galen's commentary on Hippocrates' *Prognostic* for the Cambridge Galen Translations, and of Book II of Aetius of Amida's *Books on Medicine* for the Corpus Medicorum Graecorum. We are in the process of preparing these manuscripts for posthumous publication.

Philip van der Eijk (Humboldt Universität zu Berlin)



## Acknowledgments

This double-blind peer-reviewed volume is the long-ripened fruit of scholarly efforts that began to take root during a conference in Berlin in 2014. As part of the research team A03 “The Transfer of Medical Episteme in the ‘Encyclopaedic’ Compilations of Late Antiquity”, I had the pleasure to co-organize, with my colleagues Matteo Martelli and Christine F. Salazar (of blessed memory), the conference “Gynäkologie, Frauenheilkunde und heilkundige Frauen in medizinischen Diskursen und medizinischer Praxis der Spätantike” from 27 to 29 October 2014. This event, co-hosted by the Freie Universität Berlin and the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, was made possible by the Collaborative Research Center, SFB 980 “Episteme in Bewegung” funded by the German Research Council (DFG). I would like to thank its director, Gyburg Uhlmann, and all past and present board members for their generous financial and non-material support. As the editor, and on behalf of the whole research team, I am especially indebted to Kristiane Haselmann, the academic coordinator of the SFB 980, and Agnes Klooce, A03 and *BabMed* (ERC) coordinator, who both helped with the actual conference and facilitated the funding for the work on the present volume.

Back in 2014, this meeting of an international group of scholars from various fields created lively and controversial discussions on the topic of women and/in medicine and beyond. Therefore, first of all, I have to thank those speakers and participants who due to already existing plans for publications, other commitments or simply due to unfortunate circumstances were not able to contribute their articles to this volume: Charlotte Fonrobert, Matteo Martelli, Caroline Musgrove, Sean Coughlin, Giulia Ecce, Rebecca Flemming, Petros Bouras-Vallianatos, and Hannah Tzuberi.

The conference benefitted much from the unique context in Berlin as a hub for the academic and public interest in the premodern history of knowledge, science, and medicine. Consequently, many participating colleagues who were based in Berlin or happened to be visiting as fellows in various institutions, such as the before mentioned CRC/SFB 980 “Episteme”, the Research Center (Cluster of Excellence) “TOPOI – The Formation and Transformation of Space and Knowledge in Ancient Civilizations”, The ERC-funded project *BabMed* (M. J. Geller), the Institute of Classical Philology and Ancient Science (Humboldt University), the Institute of Jewish Studies (FU Berlin), and the *Berliner Antike Kolleg* (BAK) contributed profoundly to the discussions in many ways. As the organizers, we were

especially indebted to Heinrich von Staden (IAS, Princeton), then a TOPOI fellow, who introduced the key note and public evening lecture by Charlotte Fonrobert “Talmudic Gynecology and its Relationship to Late Antique Medical Literature: Transfigurations of ‘Women’s Affairs’ (*Gynaikeia*)” and served as an attentive interlocutor throughout the conference. Also Gerrit Bos (Cologne/Haarlem), another TOPOI-fellow in 2014, enriched our discussion with his expertise in medicine in medieval Jewish and Arabic texts and contexts.

Since this initial event some time has passed for which one may give various reasons beyond the recent pandemic turmoil. First, the conference was conceived as a broad interdisciplinary endeavor of re-reading and scrutinizing women’s medicine and the role of women in medicine within and across various ancient cultures. Unfortunately, precisely this transcultural and interdisciplinary approach was held against the project when we approached publishers and pertinent series in the field. Luckily, after a dormant period, we could find a new home for this book in the newly founded series “Ancient Cultures of Sciences and Knowledge (ASK)” with Mohr Siebeck which focuses precisely on the transcultural entanglements in the history of knowledge and nurtures interdisciplinary studies and new approaches to respective subjects. Accordingly, I owe my gratitude to Henning Ziebritzki who welcomed this initiative and took the risk to start this new series as well as to Katharina Gutekunst, Elena Müller, and Tobias Stäbler, the past and current program directors overseeing the ASK series.

Moreover, this longer ripening process of the book opened up unexpected possibilities for broadening the scope of the book even further. Along the way, through new encounters and connections, especially during my research fellowships at Harvard University and The Katz Center for Judaic Studies (University of Pennsylvania), new articles on Jewish Babylonian contexts and early Christian traditions supplemented the existing collection.

This book project would have been unthinkable without the constant support and encouragement of the two directors of the research group A03 at the CRC/SFB 980 “Episteme in Motion”, namely Mark Geller and Philip van der Eijk, both of whom I owe special thanks. Christine Salazar, whose sudden illness and death in late 2021 came as a shock to her many friends and colleagues, has helped shaping this volume in its inception (proposals, concepts) and at later stages (proof reading and reviewing some of the contributions on Greek texts) – especially with her keen eye and constructive judgment shaped by her work as a professional copy editor at Cambridge University Press. Ricarda Gäbel who joined our A03 research team in Berlin from 2017 to 2020, deserves special mentioning, since we developed together the structure of the introductory survey and Ricarda aptly contributed some substantial drafts discussing the content of Greek medical texts which I elaborated upon in my final article. The same praise applies to Ulrike Steinert (Mainz), former member of the ERC-project *BabMed* at FU Berlin, who despite her many other responsibilities wrote or supplemented some of the sections

on ancient Mesopotamian sources in this introduction. Moreover, I thank Tanja Pommerening whom I consulted regarding the passages on ancient Egypt in my introduction. Finally, my utter gratitude goes to Sean Coughlin (Prague, *Alchemies of Scent*), who as a colleague, formerly working with Philip van der Eijk's research group at HU Berlin, has dedicated his precious time to copy editing this introduction-cum-bibliography and unified the quotations of and references to all Greek and Latin texts mentioned therein.

The aim of both the conference and the present volume has been to facilitate the exchange within and between various scholarly fields that research the many different (medical) cultures from ancient to medieval time. This is, and has to be, a constant effort and truly a work-in-progress, in the most affirmative sense of this term. I am positively convinced that the contributions in this book will serve as trailblazing studies or, to put it more modestly, door openers for a rich and more comprehensive exchange on these subjects and other areas of premodern medicine, healthcare, and body studies – not only between their authors but far beyond this initial group – serving as an impulse for many more future studies.



## I. Conceived Conceptions and Conceptual Controversies





# Re-reading Gynaecology in the Ancient World

## A Transcultural and Interdisciplinary Survey\*

LENNART LEHMHAUS

In recent years, scholarly interest in the field of ancient history of medicine and science has shifted away from the search for “pure” medical information and, in the wake of the cultural, body and gender studies approaches, has turned towards a more comprehensive understanding of illness, health, and healing in various ancient traditions as inextricably bound to its diverse religious, cultural, socio-political and textual backgrounds. Many studies now focused more on a comparison and contextualization of medical discourses within and across neighboring cultures in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. Consequently, medical ideas, especially regarding anatomy, physiology and sexuality, form a part of the broader Graeco-Roman and Ancient Near Eastern traditions that shaped different constructions of male and female bodies or definitions of sex and gender.

The present volume is inspired by these broader trends and aims at contributing to the scholarship and lively academic discourse from the perspective of ancient medicine and the history of knowledge. Taking a truly interdisciplinary approach to the field of ancient medicine, this book brings together scholars who work on ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, on Graeco-Roman traditions from Ar-

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\* This introductory essay is broad in its scope and touches upon various topics not usually subsumed under the common roof of “gynaecology”. It is also an attempt to write a transcultural and interdisciplinary survey of the topic at hand including hints at the development of and different positions or approaches within the various disciplines. This intellectual endeavor which created many opportunities for me to learn and broaden my horizon would have not been possible without the assistance of some cherished colleagues. First and foremost, I would like to express my utter gratitude to my former colleague Ricarda Gäbel whose first draft of some passages concerning Greek (and Latin) medical texts served as the basis for my later elaborations and supplementary references to pertaining scholarship. Furthermore, I am greatly indebted to Ulrike Steinert whose much welcome additions and references with regard to ancient Mesopotamian traditions have helped to substantially improve the comparative perspective of this essay. I referenced Ricarda Gäbel’s and Ulrike Steinert’s respective contributions in the notes to the relevant sections.

I owe special thanks to Sean Coughlin (Prague) who helped with a final native speaker copy-editing of this introductory essay and attended to the unification of titles and references to the Greek and Latin works mentioned therein. Finally, I am grateful to Tanja Pommerening who read my sections on ancient Egypt and provided some additional references.

istotle to late antique medical compilations, on Jewish culture between biblical sources and medieval texts as well as on Syriac text and early Christian traditions.

The contributions to this volume address various dimensions of female physiology, gynecological issues, and female expertise in different formats. The contributions range from broader surveys of the topic in a specific culture or tradition (Pommerening, Steinert, Bhayro) and synchronic or diachronic surveys of relevant aspects or sources (Caballero Navas, Meacham, Lillis, Strauch Schick, Amsler) to focused case-studies of specific authors, texts or topics (Calà, Kottek, Soardi, Ilan). The studies merge philological and textual or literary approaches with interest in historical background and a socio-cultural framing of the sources, often combined with a decidedly comparative and transcultural perspective.

### 1. Between Sex and Gender: Becoming and Defining Male and Female in the Premodern Mediterranean

The cultural turn in the Humanities brought with it also a scholarly corporeal turn. In its wake, historians and philologists became increasingly interested in concepts and representations of the body in and across various ancient cultures, be it in texts or in images (paintings, figurines, sculptures etc.). Those sources and artefacts were interpreted as powerful discursive devices for the social, cultural, and religious construction of female and male bodies.<sup>1</sup> Besides various methods from cultural history and religious studies, pertinent studies deployed approaches using feminist theory and gender studies, which analyzed the body discourse as a vibrant arena for inner-cultural and cross-cultural exchange, negotiation and conflict. Different concepts of human bodies, the sexes, and gender impacted on how various cultural traditions viewed sexuality, procreation, and the role of men and women therein. Of specific interest for scholars have been the social hierarchies of this discourse and the discursive and physical power that was forced on and dominated specifically women, besides children and slaves, in ancient cultures. The performance of social roles and the stabilization of conceptions of sex and gender has been understood as an apt tool to control individual and collective bodies (e. g., family, household, community, congregation).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Porter 1999; Stewart 1997, Brown 1997; Kolowski-Ostrow and Lyons 1997; DeForest 1993; Rabinowitz and Richlin 1993; Lefkowitz and Fant 1982; Fantham et al. 1994; Germanidou 2022. For biblical anthropology and concepts of the body in the Ancient Near East (Egypt/Mesopotamia), see Schroer and Staubli 2001 (esp. II.3 “God in the Belly”, 68–82); and the contributions in Berlejung, Dietrich and Quack 2012. For later developments in Jewish tradition, see Eilberg-Schwartz 1992.

<sup>2</sup> See Svård and Garcia-Ventura 2018; Budin, et al 2018; Wyke 1998; Clark 1993; Zeitlin, 1995; Nikolaidis 1997; Montserrat 1963; Dixon 1990; Cantarella 1987; McClure 2002 and 2020; Clarke 2001; Nussbaum and Sihvola 2002; Johnson and Ryan 2005; Ormand 2009; Skinner 2013; Hub-

In many instances, such control was inextricably bound to culture-specific ancient discourse about a “female nature”, or women’s anatomy and physiology. Whereas earlier scholarship in the history of ancient cultures and medicine often sought to establish correspondences between modern biological and gynaecological knowledge and ancient sources, more recent studies changed course to explore the ancient ideas for their own sake in their broader epistemic, cultural, and religious embeddedness. This included philological analysis as well as the synchronic and diachronic comparison of central terminology, appendant concepts, and their representation in varying but often correlating metaphors and images.

In ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian traditions, one finds a tendency to consider the male body as the “default setup” or paradigm for medical and other discussion about the human body, including its structure and its functions. Still, many traditions display a heightened awareness of the specifics of the female body to be discussed in a section below.<sup>3</sup> According to several Egyptian mythological texts, male and female (deities) were created by a father-god (Atum, Re) through an act of masturbation. In some sources, this includes the self-masturbation with a handmade (clay) vagina.<sup>4</sup>

In Mesopotamian mythology, the first divine cosmic entities engendering aspects of the universe are either female (e. g., Namma, the primordial waters, “Mother of Everything”, a “self-procreating womb”) or complementary elements representing a male–female couple as foundational entities (e. g., the oceans Apsû and Tiamat, or Heaven and Earth), while the first human beings are usually created by male gods (e. g., Enlil, Marduk) or through cooperation of a divine couple, as in the Sumerian myth *Enki and Ninmah* and the Akkadian *Atramḫasīs Myth*, where a mother goddess, together with female assistants called “wombs”, cooperates with

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bard 2013; Wilkinson 2015; Mulder-Bakker and Wogan-Browne 2005; Pedrucci and Pasche-Guignard 2017; Centlivres Challet 2022. For source texts, see MacLachlan 2012 and 2013. On Graeco-Roman and early Christian attitudes to female homosexuality, see Hallett 1989; Rabinowitz and Auanger 2002; Brooten 1996. For the rabbinic discourse on body, gender and sexuality, see Boyarin 1993; and the discussion of his impact in Seidman 1994, Fonrobert 2005, Rosen-Zvi 2013. and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2005. More general on sexuality, see Satlow 1995; and on the cultural, religious and social status of women in Jewish (biblical, Qumranic, and rabbinic) traditions, see Baker 2002; Sassoon 2011. For the sociocultural and religious implications of marriage and motherhood in early Christian traditions, see Solevag 2013.

<sup>3</sup> For the male body as the normative body in Mesopotamian medical texts, cf. Heeßel 2006. At the same time, Mesopotamian healers recognized both similarities and differences between male and female bodies, acknowledging the specific female reproductive roles and bodily processes links to it, the existence of medical problems reserved to the female body and the needs for gender-specific, context-dependent treatments for women’s health problems, which is reflected in a sub-corpus of medical texts solely concerned with the female body and the specific practices encountered therein (see Couto-Ferreira 2018c; Steinert 2020a and *infra*).

<sup>4</sup> See Pommerening 2023 (in this volume) 146–147 and 151–152. For instance, the divine masturbation of Re creates the gods Shu and Tefnut who are in other texts associated with the male penis and the female vulva–vagina complex as well as with air (male) and moisture (female).

the god Enki/Ea.<sup>5</sup> The *Atramḫasis Myth* features the most complex description of anthropogony, differentiating between the creation of a human “prototype”, followed by the creation of male and female humans and the installation of the cultural and ritual practices revolving around reproduction and birth.<sup>6</sup>

In one of the biblical creation accounts (Genesis 2), the first woman is formed from the bodily material of the first man (from his ribs and his flesh) while he is in deep slumber. While this sequence might appear as suggesting an ontological female inferiority, the Bible and later Jewish traditions stress that the solitary male human is incomplete without Eve, the first woman.<sup>7</sup> This sense of (hierarchically structured) partnership between men and women is to be found in the Jewish idea that “for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” (Gen 2:24) and in several ideas about active female participation in conception and gestation, as will be shown in the following.<sup>8</sup>

For Greek antiquity and most of the later development in Western cultures, Thomas Laqueur offered a narrative that has shaped the scholarly discourse for the last three decades. In his view, the idea of a one-sex model prevailed in antiquity and premodern times. This concept understands men and women as equipped with the same body, which is only marked as different by bodily heat (men) or coldness (women) and by the outward or introversive anatomy of the genitals. Consequently, women would be perceived basically as deficient males. However, Laqueur’s arguments have been partially and fundamentally challenged, since scholars demonstrated that the opinions on sexual differences in ancient and premodern time were much more diverse and dynamic.<sup>9</sup>

Although he is sometimes credited with ideas of gender-equality, in Plato’s view there is an essential difference between the (moral) nature of men and women, which makes the latter inferior in several aspects. Aristotle suggested in his biology of the human animal a natural, i. e., biological female inferiority that makes them subject to male domination/rule, since women are more compas-

<sup>5</sup> See e. g., Leick 1994, 11–20; Lambert 2013; George 2016; Steinert 2012b, 47–57. For the phallic aspects of the creative god Enki focusing on male semen as procreative substance, see Leick 1994, 21–29.

<sup>6</sup> See e. g., Lambert and Millard 1969, 55–65; Stol 2000a, 109–119 and Steinert 2023 (in this volume). I thank Ulrike Steinert for this paragraph.

<sup>7</sup> See Richler 2015 vs. Eskenazi 2015.

<sup>8</sup> See Noort 2000; DeVun 2018; Brettler 2014. For a survey of the biblical creation narratives in Jewish and Christian traditions, see Luttkhuizen 2000; Weissenrieder and Dolle 2019, 455–459 and 480–489.

<sup>9</sup> See Laqueur 1990. For a substantial critique and most recent revision of his thesis, see King 2013a. Pinault 1993 suggests that ancient Greek medical writers felt at times uneasy with the opposites of hard/muscular and hot male bodies and the softness or fleshiness paired with moist in women, since physiologically fleshiness or fatness constituted a major impairment to the central female role of being fertile.

sionate, driven by their impulses and tend to deceive.<sup>10</sup> However, in Greek medical texts earlier than Aristotle, such as *Diseases of Women* (8.10–406 L.), one finds a model of sexual differences that clearly distinguished two sexes and saw their bodies and ailments sometimes even as dichotomous.<sup>11</sup> Galen's theories which shaped medical views for centuries were rather complex and, while displaying a medical penchant for two distinct bodies/sexes, still reiterated the idea of clear female inferiority.<sup>12</sup>

Repercussions of these assumptions can be noticed in various traditions throughout late antiquity and remained strong discursive concepts well into the medieval period and beyond. For instance, the Hebrew gynaecological text by *Do'eg the Edomite* legitimizes this work on female anatomy and physiology as an appropriation by male experts. According to Carmen Caballero Navas, the author of this work deploys three entangled aspects that recall Greek and Roman strategies of policing female bodies: the notion of "female bodies as weak and prone to disease, women's modesty and shame, and the role of the father as an expert on women's conditions".<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Containers, Rivers, and Fields – Gynaecological Concepts, Imageries, and Metaphors of Female Anatomy and Physiology

Ancient cultures conceptualized the female body through different, culture-specific imageries and metaphors. Still one can observe interesting conceptual overlaps across these traditions. All of them share a striking focus on the breasts and the genitals, as the body parts connected to conceiving and nursing a child, which points to the importance of motherhood and reproduction as the backdrop for such ideas that shaped and defined female identity. In antiquity, female reproductive body parts, especially the vagina and the womb, were cross-culturally conceptualized deploying imageries of containers, vessels and confined spaces (houses), as will be exemplified in this section.<sup>14</sup> This involves complex and dynamic concepts that play out between the (mainly male made) images and cultural representations and the realm of female experience and practices "on the ground".<sup>15</sup> The

<sup>10</sup> See Mayhew 2004; Horowitz 1966, Lange 1983; Sissa 1983; Kosman 2010; Pagnotta 2022; Soardi 2018; Connell 2016, 265–291; Gelber 2019.

<sup>11</sup> See Hanson 1992b; King 2013a; Dean-Jones 2018, 251–252.

<sup>12</sup> See Flemming 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Caballero Navas 2023 (in this volume) 218; see the whole discussion *ibid.*, 193–230.

<sup>14</sup> For transcultural studies of female reproductive organs, specifically the uterus/womb, see Couto-Ferreira and Verderame 2018; and Guyvarc'h and Mehl 2022. For a survey of the diachronic history of pregnancy, childbirth, and midwifery, see Filipini 2020.

<sup>15</sup> For comparative studies of ancient ideas about womanhood and motherhood, see Cameron and Kuhrt 1983; Cooper and Phelan 2017; Hackworth Petersen and Salzman-Mitchell 2012;

reproductive function of female bodies, spaces and fertility in general, is in Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Graeco-Roman traditions the sphere of specific deities, especially goddesses. In biblical and rabbinic traditions, this function is exclusively performed by the God of Israel who is asked for help in matters of reproduction and, consequently, seen as the one who “opens and closes” the womb.<sup>16</sup> Later Jewish and Christian traditions developed ideas about the wisdom of the womb and deployed other metaphors and metonymies in the area of the female body, procreation and gestation for their largely religious discourse.<sup>17</sup>

Ancient Egyptian texts develop the complex idea of the uterine complex which is not completely identical with the uterus and/or the vagina. In medical texts, the aspect of the “organ of femininity” might be the exact meaning for *i d.t* derived from terms for mother animals (mostly cows, donkeys), where it designates the “reproductive female”. The *kA.t* as a term for the vulva and vagina represents the female counterpart to the male phallus. Another term for the vulva-vagina complex *šd* plays with the imagery of a “lipped container” or “mortar” that functions together with the “pestle” of the phallus. Such everyday metaphors from the realm of craft or cooking were also evident in the imagery of the women as a container: the womb or the female reproductive organs (*kA.t*) figure as a jar or vessel, while the “vessel” is also understood as the symbol of a mother goddess and a container in which the gods created model humans.<sup>18</sup> Of special importance for transcultural comparison, is the idea “that in the inner part of the *i d.t* living beings can reside” which combines the image of the container with the architectural space of a house.<sup>19</sup>

Healing texts and other literary sources from ancient Mesopotamia attest to a similar set of imageries and metaphors of the female reproductive body, which serve as models to conceptualize women’s reproductive processes.<sup>20</sup> In Mesopotamia, the female body/sex was “essentially defined by the vulva and the womb”, while breasts were apparently “not conceived of as primary distinction between the sexes”.<sup>21</sup> The breasts are emphasized in visual representations of nude and

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Budin 2011; Budin and Turfa 2016; Peskowitz 1997, Baker 2002; Berquist 2002; Dixon 1990; Du-Bois 1991 (on metaphorical objectification of women in ancient Greek culture); Sharrock and Keith 2020; Pedrucci 2020b; Marshall 2015 (ancient Egypt); Constantinou and Skouroumouni-Stavrinou (forthcoming). For later approaches in the medieval Middle East, see Verskin 2020.

<sup>16</sup> See e. g., Gen 30:1–2; 1 Sam 1:10–13; Hiob 3:10. Cf. Schroer and Staubli 2001, 72–82; Grohmann 2007; De-Whyte 2018. Cf. Verskin 2020; Hölbl 2022; Kanta and Betancourt 2022.

<sup>17</sup> On Jewish and early Christian deployment of such imagery, see Flannery 2012; Iricinschi 2013; Gribetz 2017; Buell 1999, esp. 21–68. For ancient sources of the container image, see Weissenrieder and Dolle 2019, 508–509.

<sup>18</sup> See Pommerening 2023 (in this volume), 141–152; Manniche 2006; Frandsen 2007; Spieser 2018.

<sup>19</sup> See Pommerening 2023 (in this volume,) 141 (“Oh you ... in the broad judgement hall, lords of the south and north sanctuary”). Cf. Audouit 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Couto-Ferreira 2013, 2014, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Steinert 2013, 2016, 2017a.

<sup>21</sup> Asher-Greve 1997, 438.

breastfeeding females, but cuneiform textual sources including healing texts place much more emphasis on the vulva and womb than on the breasts. The appearance and physical features of women's breasts were observed in diagnostic and physiognomic texts for the purpose of making predictions about a woman's reproductive capacities, about the sex of a pregnant woman's fetus, or about the wellbeing of the expecting mother and her child. However, no therapeutic texts dealing with ailments affecting the female breasts are yet attested within the women's health care texts from Mesopotamia – an absence that is unexpected and perhaps related to the fragmentary nature of the sources, or to specializations of health care professionals, where such issues fell into the domain of midwives (rather than male healers).<sup>22</sup>

These metaphors are encountered at the level of Akkadian and Sumerian body-part terms as well as on a textual and text-hermeneutical level (e. g., in commentaries explaining the terminology of healing texts). Thus, we find interrelated metaphors of the womb as a container, which is instantiated in imagery comparing the womb to vessels (e. g., waterskin, brewing vessels), or to an architectural space (e. g., house, oven, cow pen). Moreover, the female body is compared to landscapes, especially agricultural ones (e. g., field, meadow, garden, river). These metaphors allude to an often vague but experience-near understanding of female anatomy/physiology, which may have been influenced by knowledge about the anatomy of domestic animals.<sup>23</sup> They are connected to more complex models of women's bodily processes – relating to (in)fertility, conception, pregnancy, delivery, bleeding and other bodily discharges – that draw on processes in the environment and on cultural practices linked to agriculture and craft production (e. g., pottery, brewing, textile industry). Although these models and metaphors are used in context-specific ways in women's healthcare texts, other medical cuneiform texts (especially incantations) apply similar metaphors to conceptualize processes in the male body or non-gender-specific pathologies, e. g., digestive disorders. Thus, processes in the environment are drawn on by way of analogy to make sense of both normal and pathological processes in the human body, but these metaphors also guide the choice of therapeutic strategies.<sup>24</sup> The application of technological models is based on an interventionist logic that bodily processes can be regulated, influenced or acted upon just as the environment is acted upon through cultural practices and technologies. In connection with women's fertility and reproductive processes, particularly the use of agricultural metaphors in medical (and other) texts also reflects underlying concerns about "cultivating" female

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<sup>22</sup> Scurlock and Andersen 2005, 669–670; Minen 2018, 173; 2020, 11–15.

<sup>23</sup> See Steinert 2017b for a discussion of hints to the idea of a double-chambered cow's uterus serving as a model for women's reproductive system. For possible parallels in rabbinic texts and their knowledge and use of animal anatomy and physiology often expressed in analogies, see Amsler 20223 (in this volume 399–419).

<sup>24</sup> See Steinert and Vacín 2018; Steinert 2020a.



bodies in order to make them “productive”.<sup>25</sup> Ancient and late antique Egyptian (Demotic) texts on prognoses of pregnancy lively illustrate the connection between female fertility and the growth of produce. The women are advised to urinate on grains or a specific plant. If the plants remain alive the woman will be pregnant, if they wither no pregnancy is prognosticated.<sup>26</sup>

Ideas about the female body as a field to be cultivated by the male sower or plough-man shaped also biblical, later Jewish, Graeco-Roman and Middle Eastern ideas about sexuality and conception. In addition, various texts draw an analogy between women and their womb and an oven (*kaminos*), a hearth (*hestia*) and a baking-oven (*klibanos*).<sup>27</sup> Besides the idea of sowing and baking, Greek tradition connects the womb with the elementary or agricultural imagery of moisture or water and also with rivers and channels that guarantee for fluidity, i. e., the right functioning of the female physiology and its bodily fluids.<sup>28</sup> As in other ancient cultures, the imagery of the container or vessel prevailed in Graeco-Roman gynaecological discourse. Hanson states that the “Hippocratic” saw the uterus as an up-turned jar, with its bottom on top and its mouth at the bottom turned in a downward direction. The uterine mouth in the mature woman learned to purse its lips and close, when its contents were to be retained, but to open the lips again at the proper time in order to release what was within.<sup>29</sup> In addition, one finds analogies with cupping instruments, wineskins, jars, or vases, both in some early Greek medical (‘Hippocratic’)<sup>30</sup> texts as well as in material objects.<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, Near Eastern imagery, the Bible and rabbinic texts feature various metaphors of containers for the body, especially for women’s bodies and their re-

<sup>25</sup> Steinert 2017a; Couto-Ferreira 2017, 2018a; Leick 1994, 21–54; Simkins 2014; Budin 2015; Stol 2000a, 4–6. I am indebted to Ulrike Steinert for providing this information. On biblical (positive and negative) conceptions of (in)fertility, see Grohmann 2007, 151–304.

<sup>26</sup> See Hoffmann 2021, who also mentions the use of the specific plant (Great Hapi/Nile) for stopping a flow of blood, another common ailment linked to female infertility.

<sup>27</sup> For the different metaphors, see the Hippocratic *Generation/Nature of the Child* 4 (7.474–6 L.), 12 (7.486 L.), 22 (7.514 L.), 30 (7.536 L.), as well as Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals* 764a12–20.

<sup>28</sup> See Dean-Jones 1994, 45–46 (moisture); DuBois 1988, 47 f., 57 f., 65 f., 86 f., 130–133 (on agricultural and other metaphors); Totelin 2020c (on rivers, channels, female fluidity). On uterine amulets, see Hanson 1995b; Tasatsou 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Hanson 2007, 48. See also Sissa 2013, 90, 94, and 96. Cf. sources such as Hippocrates, *Aphorisms* 5.51 (4.550 L.); *On Generation*, 5 (7.476 L.); Aristotle, *History of Animals* 7.3, 583b29; Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts*, 14.3 (146 K.).

<sup>30</sup> In line with recent research in the field of ancient Greek medicine and the textual and philological studies of relevant texts, I use throughout this essay the descriptor “early Greek medical texts” instead of the sometimes misleading “Hippocratic texts”. For the pertinent scholarly debate, see van der Eijk 2016. I thank Sean Coughlin for bringing this issue to my attention.

<sup>31</sup> See Flemming 2017, esp. 126–128. More general on knowledge about female anatomy, see Reilly 1997; Scarborough 1992; Schubert and Huttner 1999, 76–97; Bodiou 2022.

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