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CASTRATION AMONG THE SCYTHIANS:  
HERODOTUS AND HIPPOCRATES, TWO PARADIGMS OF  
INTERPRETATION<sup>1</sup>

Maria do Sameiro Barroso<sup>2</sup>

Herodotus (5th century BC) referred to the oldest temple of Aphrodite Urania in the Syrian city of Ascalon, in the following terms:

They withdraw by way of Ascalon in Syria. The bulk the army passed the town without doing any damage, but a small number of men got left behind and robbed the temple of Aphrodite Urania – the most ancient, I’m told, of all the temples of this goddess. The one in Cyprus the Cyprians themselves admit was derived from it, but the one in Cythera was built by the Phoenicians, who belong to this part of Syria. The Scythians who robbed the temple at Ascalon were punished with the infliction of what is called the ‘female disease’, and their descendants still suffer from it. This is the reason the Scythians give for this mysterious complaint, and travellers to the country can see what it is like, The Scythians call those who suffer from it ‘Enarees’. (Sélingcourt, 1972, p. 84)

In this excerpt, Herodotus refers to the cult of Aphrodite whose history began in Sumer, Assyria, Babylon and Phoenicia in the Mediterranean, from 5000 BC with the Goddess Inana, wife of the Shepherd God Dumuzi, queen of the sky and Goddess of the Night and the Morning Star. She is a Goddess of vegetation and fertility par excellence. In Sumerian cities and

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<sup>1</sup> English translation of the article *A castração entre os citas: Heródoto e Hipócrates, dois paradigmas de interpretação*, “Medicina na Beira Interior – Cadernos de Cultura Medicina na Beira Interior, da Pré-História ao Século XXI”, n. ° XXVII., pp. 103-106.

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temples, she lived together with the not less prominent Mother Goddess Ninhursag, who was the generator of life, Inanna as the Goddess of the maintenance of life (Grigson, 1987, p. 16).

The cult of these Goddesses underlies the cult of an earlier Goddess, Great Goddess, Méter, Goddess of life, mother of all gods and all men and animals. The Anatolian Mother Goddess had arisen as the Goddess Cybele, the Phrygian Goddess. Her worship was manifestly private, being supported and disseminated by begging priests, *metragýrtai*, of Phrygian origin, who called themselves Kýbeboi (Burkert, 1993, p. 349).

The castration of Cíbele's priests, the *Galoi*, was part of the rituals of the Goddess cult, in Pessino, an ancient Hittite-Phrygian region (Burkert, 1993, pp. 349-350). At the top of the hierarchy of this mystical cult, made up of sacred eunuchs, there was a high priest called Attis. A black meteorite was the sacred stone around which the centre of devotion to the Goddess was established (Kluft, 2003, p. 56-57). The castration ritual was not well regarded by the Greeks, who did not officiate the worship of the Goddess.

The characteristics of Aphrodite, in Greece, are narrated by the poet Hesiod who lived between 750 to 650 BC, in the work Theogony in which he recounts that Aphrodite was born from the white foam wrapping the immortal flesh (the sexual organs of Uranus), the sky, husband of Geia, the Earth, cut by his son Cronos with a scythe when he hugged her. The mutilation was not in vain, says Hesiod, because the Earth received all the drops of blood. The genitals, cut and thrown into the stormy sea, were carried by the waves. From them a girl was born, first landing in the sacred Citera, and proceeded to Cyprus, surrounded by the waves. There, the land turned green as she passed, when it touched it with her delicate feet. Among men and gods, her name was Aphrodite because he was born from the foam of the sea. Eros was her companion. Desire followed her closely from the beginning immediately after joining the gods. Aphrodite was the

one that smiled, sweet loving and full of charm. (Hesiod, Teog. 177-206 in Mair, 1908, pp. 28-29).

It is worth noting that Aphrodite was born from male sexual organs in the sea, female medium par excellence and that castration has become the act of male fertilization, carried out to conceive a Goddess, whose element of female generation is at the elemental and cosmic level.

In addition to the mythical-religious level, Herodotus' text explains an illness, frequent among the Scythians, impotence. Divine punishment was one of the most frequent explanations for the origin of diseases in ancient proto-medicines. At the beginning of the Iliad, we came across the armies, devastated by the plague, sent by Apollo.

Indeed, Hippocrates referred to the prevalence of sexual impotence among the Scythians and other nomadic peoples that he attributed to the excessive activity of riding horses. The Scythians tried to treat the health problem with cauterizations on the shoulders, arms, chest, hips and lower back to strengthen the muscles. When the treatment failed, they took for themselves the female work, acting like women. They were called 'effeminate'. The indigenous people attributed the cause of this affection to the deity they venerated, the Goddess Cíbele.

Next, Hippocrates states that all diseases have a divine origin, that there are no more divine or more human diseases, all being similar and divine. Moreover, shifting to a different point of view, he clarifies that all diseases have a natural cause and that, without a natural cause, nothing comes up. Furthermore, he starts to express his opinion, conveying the result of his careful observation of the Scythians' habits of life.

The cause of impotence among them because they spend their lives on horseback, which causes joint inflammation, as they are always with their feet dangling along with the horse. Those that are most severely affected get lameness. In addition to the factors that cause impotence, it adds

chronic fatigue, caused by excessive physical exercise and the use of pants (Hippocrates, Aër. 22 in Littré, 1840, Vol II, p.p. 77-79).

Aristotle 384-322 B.C.), in the work Ethics, Nicomanus also referred to what he called a hereditary disease that affected the Scythian kings who became effeminate (Aristotle 1150b 12-16 in Irwin, p. 110).

In our view, the interpretation of Hippocrates lists in a very correct and precise way the health problems caused by the excess of physical exercise, the lack of rest and the consequences of overriding.

The first attempts to domesticate horses date back to the 4th millennium BC. It is not clear whether the horse began to be mounted immediately by the nomadic tribes of Central Asia, since riding wild horses is not an easy job (Sevestre / Rosier, 1983, pp. 14 -15). In the 2nd millennium a. C., there are images of horses harnessed to agricultural cars, carrying goods or war arrays, appear in Turkey, Assyria and Egypt (Clutton-Brock, 1992, pp. 68-69). The practice of riding a horse became widespread around 1 000 BC. C. Bridles were the first equipment of horses. The use of blankets preceded the saddle (Clutton-Brock, 1992, p. 73).

In terms of the history of Hyppology, the Scythians occupy a prominent place in the art of riding. They were nomadic people, originally from the steppes of Eurasia, speaking an Iranian language and. Little is known about them since they had no writing. They spent most of their lives on horseback and kept moving almost always, taking their herds of horses with them. In the 8th century BC, they migrated to the steppes to the North of the Black Sea, proceeded until Asia Minor, arriving at the Greek borders. They settled down and established cultural and commercial exchange with the Greeks. The Scythians were the first to manufacture saddles. They created a double leather cushion, about 60 cm long, slightly elevated at the rear, firmly fixed with the mane around the horse's sides and abdomen. Although it was not a quite firm saddle, it somehow guaranteed stability, comfort and

safety to the rider. There are indications that they used a leather tie, attached to the saddle, which would serve as a footrest, functioning as a stirrup. However, this invention is usually attributed to the Huns, in the 4th century AD. (Dossenbach, 1987, p. 120).



Figure 1 – Scythian saddle blanket. Altai, 4<sup>th</sup> BC. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Museum of the Hermitage. St. Petersburg, Russia.

Although they managed to craft some protection, conferred by the use of the saddle and the ties that acted as stirrups, given the life they led, almost permanently on horseback, they would be easily subject to trauma, inflammation and infections of the sexual organs and perineum. Due to friction and increased temperature (sperm do not survive temperatures above 36° C.) the function of the testicles, sperm producers and male sex hormone secretors, would also be affected. The use of trousers, contrary to what Hippocrates thought, would be beneficial, as it would give more protection to the perineum, the sexual organs and the lower limbs, and would facilitate the adhesion between the horse and the rider.

The Scythian saddles do not seem to have reached the Greeks who, being sedentary peoples, rode with bare legs on horseback. Xenophon (c. 430 - 355 B.C.), who wrote the first treatise on equitation that came up to us, refers to seat cloths. As the knight's equipment, he refers only to high leather boots (Xenophon, in Morgan, 1962, p. 69). The riders rode with their legs dangling along the horse's flanks. (Fig.1).



Figure 2 - Marble plate depicting a Greek knight. National Museum of Athens. Photograph by Ivo Miguel Barroso.

The seat cloths were blankets, not the Scythian saddles. There is also no ancient word, Greek or Latin, to designate the metal stirrups that emerged in Europe at the beginning of the 8th century AD (Clutton-Brock, 1992, p. 76).

Jacques Jouanna discussed this text in the scope of the rationalization of the divine, operated by Hippocratic thought, having compared the texts of Herodotus and Hippocrates and attributed the disease to the higher classes of the Scythians because only these had horses and could afford to ride (Jouanna, 1999, pp. 188-190).

The most important fact that stands out when we read the two texts by Herodotus and Hippocrates are the two perspectives marking the evolution of Greek thought. In what concerned the origin of diseases, the Greek thought shifted carefully and decidedly to the rational level observation and interpretation. It should be noted that Hippocrates begins by not intending to contradict the religious origin, but his rational interpretation ended up pervading.

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