

XANTHOS AND THE PROBLEM OF FEMALE EUNUCHS IN LYDIA

It is proposed to offer a rational explanation of Xanthos' assertion that the Lydians were able to castrate women.

Athenaios (12.111 p. 515) cites Xanthos (*fr.* 19 u. FGH 765 fr. 4 Jacoby) to the effect that the Lydians were so effeminate that they castrated (*εὐνοχίσαι*) even women, whom they then used the way they used male eunuchs. One account attributes the invention of this operation to Adramytion, but Suidas, s. v. (*fr.* 4 Jac.), attributes it to Gyges. According to Xanthos, this operation sought to preserve the youthful charms of the castrated girls.

This arresting report requires a careful scrutiny. Indeed, no one seems to have asked just what Xanthos meant by the "eunuchization" of women, nor the way the use of these women resembled the way boy eunuchs were used, nor whether the alleged operation could, in fact, preserve the youthful bloom of such female "eunuchs".

The first thing one must therefore do, is to determine just what "making a woman into a eunuch" means in this particular context. LSJ, s. v., cites this Xanthos passage, but does not elucidate the nature of the operation this verb allegedly designates.

I consider it self-evident that a true castration – an oöphorectomy – may not be envisaged, for two reasons:

(1) In antiquity the ovaries had not yet been identified as the sexual glands (gonads) of the female.

(2) An ovariectomy involves abdominal surgery (laparotomy) which Lydian physicians were assuredly unable to perform¹).

The next consideration is that, even if the Lydians had been able to perform an oöphorectomy, be it before or after the onset of puberty, this would not have achieved its avowed purpose, which was to preserve for a long time the girl's youthful beauty (*ὅπως αὐταῖς χρόνιο ἄει νεαζούσαις* Suid. a.O.). Since, as noted, I need a true oöphorectomy unimaginable, I need

1) The Greeks of the classical period were apparently not even able to castrate the cock whose testicles are, of course, inside his body. The word *κάτων* is attested only by the *Glossaria*.

not discuss here why that operation, regardless of the age at which it was performed, would only have caused the girl to wilt prematurely. Instead, I will turn my attention at once to the factors which cause a woman to lose her adolescent, virginal looks.

What ages a woman's body most is the process which includes pregnancy, birth and lactation. The breasts become pendulous, the abdomen marked by striae and the hips and buttocks much more voluminous than those of virgins²). Moreover, the vagina often loses some of its tonus and therefore becomes less tight than it was before childbirth. Some Arab women therefore counteract this effect of childbirth on the vagina by a local application of astringents. Some Somali use even more radical means: the men cause their (already excised but now defibulated) wives to be partly re-infibulated (sewn up) after childbirth³).

In my estimate, what the authors who cited the information provided by Xanthos referred to was not a true "eunuchization" (oöphorectomy) but an attempt to preserve these girls' youthful appearance by depriving them of their capacity to become pregnant and bear children. This hypothesis implies only that the Lydian men could not trust themselves to cohabit with certain girls *only per anum*. That they did cohabit with the "eunuch" girls in this manner is indicated by the specification that they were used [sexually] *the way* male castrates were used.

The next point to be considered is the manner in which such girls were rendered sterile. I specify at once that the verb "to make into a eunuch" makes it necessary to indicate some procedure which classical antiquity itself *equated with* the castration of males. This excludes a priori the possibility that they were aborted routinely, for abortion is, so far as I know, not compared to castration in any classical text.

Four alternatives can be envisaged:

(1) Though the Greeks were allegedly able to turn the hierophant, of Eleusis, into a "eunuch" by making him ingest *Cicuta* juice⁴), there is, to my knowledge, no ancient account of the "castration" of women by pharmacological means.

2) Ruf. ap. Orib. *inc.* 2.24: *ὑπόλιστοι* [παρθῆνοι]. This indicates that the Greeks were aware of this fact.

3) G. Rôheim: The National Character of the Somali, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 13: 199-221, 1932.

4) Archig. ap. Orib. 8.2.8; Hippol. *adv. haer.* 5.8, p. 162 D-S; Hieronym. *adv. Iovin.* 1.49, p. 320C. Vall.; Serv. *V. Aen.* 6.661.

(2) Excision, but not infibulation, is mentioned by Strabon (16.4.9, 771 C.). According to him, the Kreophagoi of Aithiopia excised the girls the way Jewish girls were excised (sic!). This possibility cannot be entirely discarded. Indeed according to Xanthos *fr.* 19, *FHG* 1.39, the inventor of the castration of women was Adramytion, King of Lydia. Should this King's name have any connection with the name of modern Hadramaut, in South Arabia, it would be worth noting that some ethnologists believe female excision to have spread to Africa from Hadramaut. It is also important that, even without infibulation, *some* improperly and unhygienically performed excisions cause the production of enough scar tissue to make coitus impossible⁵).

This being said, what militates against assuming that the Lydians had originated clitoridectomy (and, possibly, also a Somali-type infibulation) is that no ancient text known to me compares the excision mentioned by Strabon to "castration".

(3) The not overly reliable XIX Century explorer-ethnologist Miclucho-Maclay claimed that certain Australian tribes deliberately sterilized women, so as to use them as tribal prostitutes. They inserted, via the vagina, a pointed and hooked instrument into the cervix, and lacerated it by this means⁶) so severely that, in case of pregnancy, abortion was automatic, since the torn cervix could not seal itself off with a plug. While such an operation is possible even for primitives⁷), once again the problem is that this (alleged) operation is not explicitly equated by the Australians with castration.

(4) One text only seems to *equate* the castration of males with the damaging of the female genitals. The Baktrians castrated their male battle camels in order to control their violent disposition, without impairing their strength. But they cauterized the "rutting parts" of their female camels. (Ael. *NA* 4.55.)

5) A slide, projected at the 1978 Annual meeting, (at Göttingen) of the German society *Ethnomedizin*, showed an excised girl whose hypertrophied clitoris resembled a small penis. According to the speaker, this hypertrophy was a direct consequence of the excision.

6) Miclucho-Maclay's data are cited and discussed in Ploss, H., Bartels, M. and Bartels, P.: *Das Weib in der Natur- und Völkerkunde*, 3 vols., (11., edited by F. von Reitzenstein), Berlin, 1927.

7) Abortion produced by the insertion of a pointed object into the cervix is fairly common all over the world. Cf. G. Devereux, *A Study of Abortion in Primitive Societies*², New York, 1976, (see tabulation on pp. 361-371).

The castration of males and the cauterization of the females are clearly treated here as *equivalents*. The seeming contrast between the taming of the *violent* males and the attenuation of the *oestrus* of the females does not reflect a genuine difference. In the *camelidae* the male too has a period of rut, during which he is even more ill-tempered and aggressive than usual. This extra violence is suppressed by castration.

The cauterizing of the she-camel's vulva is more puzzling. Her rutting is *not* elicited by her *vulva*, but by her *ovaries*, which cannot, of course, be cauterized. It is unlikely, but just barely possible, that – by using the kind of bone tube the Skythians inserted into the mare's vulva during milking (Hdt. 4.2) – the Baktrians managed to cauterize even the she-camel's cervix. But even that would not have suppressed the she-camel's oestrus. The cauterization could, at the most, have severely damaged the mucous membranes of her vagina, so that it could no longer secrete substantial quantities of the fluids it produces during the oestrus, and whose strong smell arouses the sexual urge (and violence) of the male camel.

There is also another reason for my doubting that the Baktrians cauterized the she-camel's vaginal tract: such an operation would very probably have rapidly triggered a severe and usually fatal septicaemia. After all, even the mere post-partum packing of the vagina with astringent substances by Arab women can cause serious complications and damage. I therefore suppose that the Baktrians cauterized only the she-camel's *external* genitals. Though that would have reduced only slightly her secretions during the oestrus, it would have made coitus painful or even impossible for her – causing her to fight off the approaches of male camels. Remains the question of the origin of the cauterization of the she-camel's vulva, whose purpose is hard to discern and whose efficacy as a means of diminishing the intensity of her oestrus is highly questionable.

In my estimate the impetus for this practice was provided by the extremely common technique of cauterizing a recently castrated *male* animal's wound *at once*, so as to stanch the flow of blood and prevent infection. If this hypothesis as to the origin of the cauterization of the she-camel's vulva is valid, that procedure would reflect an unconscious equating of the male genitals with the vulva. Now, that fantasy equation subtends not only Greek myths of change of sex, but is also manifest, e.g., in a myth of Ancient India, in which a princess temporarily deta-

ches her own sex-organs from her body and exchanges them for the male organs of a supernatural being⁸). Indian data are of some interest here, as anal coitus with women is mentioned already in very early Indian sources⁹).

I have left to the last a datum, which I could neither confirm nor refute. Some years ago a Hindu psychoanalyst told me that he had read in a book, whose author and title he no longer recalled, that some Indian rulers had "female eunuchs" as bath-women. The mention of bath-women lends this statement some credibility, while my inability to discover the source of the crux of this story incites me to doubt it. True or false as this story may be, it does at least indicate that people evolve *fantasies* about *literally* castrated women. It is to be noted that such fantasies are encountered also in psychiatric patients:

Some years ago I had in psychoanalytic treatment an American Indian graduate nurse who, during her training period in the obstetrical service of a University Hospital, had assisted at the delivery of lithopaedion: of a completely calcified dead foetus. This upsetting professional experience subsequently led to her fantasizing that all prostitutes – whom she (erroneously) imagined to be extremely sensual – had had all their internal sex organs (uterus, ovaries, etc.) removed, keeping only the vagina and the external sex organs. She also had fantasies of having irremediably damaged her own vulva in childhood by falling astride on the low door of a kitchen cabinet. Also, while having a short psychotic episode, during which she had to be locked in her room, she screamed: "Let me out into the fresh, uncastrated air!"

Conclusion

The "castration" of women, mentioned by Xanthos, cannot have been an ovariectomy. It probably involved only a cauterization of the external genitalia, comparable to the cauterization of the sex organs of she-camels in Bactria. However, the possibility of an excision, or even of an infibulation, cannot be entirely excluded.

The notion that women, too, can be "castrated" is of considerable psychiatric interest.

8) J. J. Meyer, *Sexual Life in Ancient India*, 2 vols., London, 1930, 2.389 ff.

9) Meyer, op. cit., 1.242.

Post-scriptum

The excised neolithic corpse of a woman of about 25 years was found in 1920 at Halverde Moor in Westphalia. The clitoris, the small labia and middle portion of the greater labia had been removed. The vagina was tightened. The near invisibility of the scars indicates that the operation had been done in early life.

The bronze age moor corpse of a similarly excised woman, whose vagina was however not tightened, was found in 1915 in the moor of Gigherm. Both women have been operated so competently that the antiquity of the practice cannot be doubted.

(Alfred Dieck: Beschneidung von Frauen und Männern in vor- und frühgeschichtlicher Zeit, *Curare* 4: 77-84, 1981)

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