

CAESAREAN SECTION IN ANCIENT GREEK MYTHOLOGY

CARSKI REZ U GRČKOJ MITOLOGIJI

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SUMMARY

The narrative of caesarean birth appears on several occasions in Greek mythology: in the birth of Dionysus is the God of the grape harvest and winemaking and wine; in the birth of Asclepius the God of medicine and healing; and in the birth of Adonis the God of beauty and desire. It is possible, however not obligatory, that it was not solely a fantasy but also reflected a contemporary medical practice.

Key words: Caesarean Section, Greek Mythology, Ancient World.

Myth is usually defined as a traditional sacred narrative transmitted from one generation to another in which a social or universal lack is satisfied. Myths are generally classified as follows:

- cosmogenic myths;
- myths about divine beings;
- myths about creation of men;
- myths about subsequent modification of the world;
- myth about the celestial bodies and the life of nature; and
- myth about heroes [1].

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For the ancient Greeks, myth (μῦθος) meant “fable”, “tale”, “talk” or “speech” [1]. Thus, ancient Greek mythology is a collection of stories concerning their gods and heroes, the family life of the gods, the nature of the world, and the origins and significance of their ritual practices [2]. Although they distinguished between “myth” and “history”, for the ancient Greeks, mythology, particularly heroic, was their ancient history [2]. The content of the myths was at least extraordinary in its nature. It was all about homicides, exiles, seductions and illegitimate births [3].

The narrative of caesarean birth appears on several occasions in Greek mythology (3). It involves central figures of the pantheon including some the major deities of the ‘Twelve Olympians’: Zeus, Apollo, Artemis, Aphrodite, Asclepius, Dionysus and Adonis. The intention of this paper is to describe those occasions and to suggest a medical interpretation for the described events.

THE BIRTH OF DIONYSUS.

In Greek mythology, Dionysus is the God of the grape harvest and wine-making and wine, of fruitfulness and vegetation, and of ecstatic cult [2,4]. Dionysus is of Thracio-Phrygian deity and was introduced into Greece from Thrace and Phrygia (a kingdom in the west central part of Anatolia) blending with native gods of similar character *e.g.* Iacchus [4]. All Greek Gods were born [2], however, Dionysus’s birth is exceedingly complicated and picturesque.

Dionysus was a son of Zeus, the King of Gods and of Semele, a mortal woman [2]. In Phrygian language, Semele simple means ‘earth’ [4]. By some sources [2,5], Semele was the daughter of Cadmus, a Phoenician prince and the founder of the city of Thebes, the city where Dionysus was born. Semele was loved by Zeus and when she became pregnant, Zeus promised to grant her whatever she might ask. Put up by Hera, Zeus’s wife and the Goddess of women and marriage, Semele asked Zeus to appear to her in his divine form [2].

When Zeus appeared to Semele, she was consumed by the fire of his thunderbolt. Seeing that, Zeus extracted his unborn son from his mother’s womb (*i.e.* a postmortem or perimortem caesarean section) [2,3]. Apparently all that happened remote from term (prematurely), since Zeus sewed Dionysus into his own thigh (figure 1) from where in due course he was born. Not only was Dionysus born by a postmortem caesarean section, but also as a fetus he was



Figure 1. Zeus sews Dionysus into his own thigh after he had extracted him from the womb of Semele, his dead mother. At the background there is a peacock, a bird that was a sacred symbol of Hera and Hera's watchfulness. Drawn by Einav Lurie.

transformed from one parent to another and successfully delivered thereafter (3). In this version, Dionysus is "twice-born" (by Semele and by Zeus), hence the epithet *dimētōr* (of two mothers) is associated with his birth. This is probably why Dionysus name contains the name of 'Zeus', i.e. 'son of Zeus' [3].

THE BIRTH OF ASCLEPIUS

In Greek mythology, Asclepius is the God of medicine and healing [6]. Asclepius probably came from the region of Thessaly, where his cult was originated [6]. Asclepius was a son of Apollo, the God of light and the sun, and Coronis, a mortal woman. Coronis was loved by Apollo and soon become pregnant with Asclepius. At that time, using his own prophetic powers, Apollo learned that she was unfaithful to him with Ischys (an Arcadian), another mortal [7]. Once Apollo learned of her infidelity, he had slain



Figure 2. The extraction of Asclepius from the abdomen of his dead mother Coronis by his father Apollo at the funeral pyre. Hermes stands by, helping Apollo. Drawn by Einav Lurie.

Coronis, probably with the help of his twin sister Artemis, the Goddess of hunting, childbirth and virginity [2]. It had probably happened in Coronis's own house at Lacereia in Thessaly, on the shore of lake Baebia [7].

When the body of Coronis was to be burnt, Apollo suddenly tried to save his unborn son. So, he with the help of Hermes, the God of transitions and boundaries, had snatched Asclepius from Coronis's womb [2]. This 'caesarean operation' occurred on the funeral pyre while Coronis's body was already in flames [2,3]. (figure 2). From this event Asclepius received his name ('to cut open') [7].

THE BIRTH OF ADONIS

In Greek mythology, Adonis is the God of beauty and desire [3]. The name is generally supposed to be of Phoenician or Semitic origin meaning lord (adon) [8]. Adonis was a son of Myrrha (Smyrna) and her father Theias, a Syrian king. Aphrodite, the Goddess of love had inspired the unnatural love between Theias and Myrrha by deceiving him as to her identity [8]. Eventually, Myrrha became pregnant with Adonis.



Figure 3. The caesarean birth of Adonis through a longitudinal mid-abdominal incision; the parturient Myrrha is depicted partly as human and partly as a tree. Aphrodite stands nearby watching Adonis's birth.
Drawn by Einav Lurie.

When Theias discovered the truth, he wanted to slay Myrrha, but the gods, out of pity, changed her into a tree, by the same name. After ten months the tree opened up and gave birth to Adonis. Apollodoro, a 2nd century BC mythographer described Adonis's birth as a caesarean delivery [9]. In the 18th

century, Adonis's birth was painted in a way that could be interpreted as a caesarean birth, the female figure of the tree had a longitudinal suprapubic wound [10]. An illustration of Adonis's caesarean birth is presented in figure 3; the parturient Myrrha is depicted as partly as human and partly as a tree. After he grew up, Adonis became a youth of remarkable beauty do that Aphrodite eventually fell in love with him.

INTERPRETATION

The three myths on the subject of caesarean birth narrative do in fact represent three different medical situations: ante-, peri, and post-mortem caesarean sections. The birth of Asclepius is definitely post-mortem. Coronis was dead and actually on the funeral pyre when Apollo extracted Asclepius from Coronis' womb. The extraction of Dionysus from his mothers' womb is probably a peri-mortem event. Semele was injured by Zeus' thunderbolt that did not have to be necessarily an immediately fatal injury. Yet, the injury was so severe that she could not be saved and Zeus decided to save the infant. She got on fire and was dying when Zeus extracted Dionysus from her womb. The birth of Adonis might be an ante-mortem event. It is not clear whether Myrrha sustained the birth of Adonis. In a way, Myrrha was not dead when Adonis was extracted from her. Myrrha was transferred from one life state to another. This new state (tree) is not entirely composed of "living" cells, thus in a way the birth of Adonis might be also a peri-mortem event.

The myths of caesarean delivery may be an accurate reflection of normal medical practice in their culture at the time, or it may be an expression of glorification of a certain hero [3]. After the myth has been created it was usually continue to be told because it satisfied some psychological need in the minds of their hearers [2]. Some mythologists regard myths as survival of historical past [1]. In this context, repeated description of extraction of a child from his mother's womb in an unnatural way may reflect a contemporary medical practice. On two occasions, the birth of Dionysus and the birth of Asclepius, a postmortem caesarean section is described. It is generally suggested that Greek mythology is dating from the Geometric period from 9th century BC onward [11]. The first known postmortem caesarean section was mentioned in 18th century BC in ancient Babylon (3). Next time it was mentioned by 8th century BC Roman 'Lex Regia' [3]. So it is possible that this form childbirth was also known in Greek culture. In fact, the oldest recall of a living child born by a postmortem caesarean section in the ancient world is considered

to be that of Gorgias in 483 BC [12]. Gorgias (483-376 BC) was a Greek sophist and rhetorician born in a Leontini, Syracuse province of Sicily [3]. At the time of Gorgias's birth, Leontini was a Greek commune, as almost all of Sicily. The fact that caesarean section is not mentioned in Hippocrates (5th century BC) writings and later in Galen and in Soranus (1st-2nd centuries AD) writings is against that caesarean birth was practiced in ancient Greek world.

There are, however, several different versions of the birth of Dionysus and Asclepius [13]. These different versions may bring some insights on when caesarean section were introduced in Greek culture. In early versions, dating from 8th-7th centuries BC, both Dionysus and Asclepius were born by a vaginal delivery [13]. Only later, the caesarean section narrative appeared in myths of Dionysus and Asclepius. Dionysus birth was described as normal (vaginal) birth by Hesiod in the 8th century BC [14] and as complicated birth by Hyginus 1st century BC [15]. This could reflect that practice of caesarean section was not executed in 8th-7th centuries BC Greece. Only later, perhaps following the 8th century BC Roman 'Lex Regia' ruling [3], caesarean section was introduced and performed in contemporary Greek medical practice; and it had found its way into mythology.

Another approach in interpretation of myths is to refer to them as a way to reinforce traditional morality, social structure and magic [1]. The three stories (birth of Dionysus, Asclepius and Adonis) represent the core of myths of gods and mortals that suggest that relationships between gods and mortals are something to avoid [16]. Even consenting relationships rarely had happy endings [16]: they resulted in death of Semele and Coronis. Furthermore, myths offer socially approve outlets for violating a taboo [16]. Myrrha was involved in incest relationship and is punished by unnatural birth suggestive of mortal outcome.

As in the presented three myths, origin of customs related to important phases of the life cycle such as birth, marriage, and death are frequent subjects that prevail [1]. In this way they may reflect contemporary ethics and everyday habits of their time. The plot clearly exhibited of what is wrong and what is right [1].

In summary since postmortem caesarean birth was mentioned more than once in Greek mythology and concurrently it was mentioned many times in legends of so many cultures [3], it is possible, however not obligatory, that it was not solely a fantasy but also reflected a contemporary medical practice.

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SAŽETAK

Opis poroda carskim rezom u grčkoj se mitologiji pojavljuje u nekoliko navrata: pri rođenju Dioniza, boga berbe grožđa, proizvodnje vina i vina uopće, pri rođenju Asklepija, boga liječenja i ozdravljenja te pri rođenju Adonisa, boga ljepote i požude.

Moguće je, doduše ne nužno, da to nije bio samo proizvod mašte, već da odražava onovremenu medicinsku praksu

Ključne riječi: carski rez; grčka mitologija; antika.