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FATHER OR MOTHER? STORIES OF MALE PREGNANCIES IN PHLEGON'S *DE MIRABILIBUS*

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Abstract: Phlegon was a representative of the genre „paradoxography”, telling stories about marvellous, interesting and fabulous events and phenomena. Frequently he is looked at as a pure fictionist without any real background and relevance from the point of view of historic research. However a comparative analysis of his stories and our recent knowledge in natural sciences indicate the feasibility of the background of his „tales”. Accordingly even such fantastic topics like male pregnancy and parturition may potentially have a core of truth.

Key- words: Phlegon, paradoxography, male pregnancy and parturition, intersexuality.

The following sensational title appeared in a newspaper article published about a year ago: “Pregnant man gives birth to baby girl.”¹ However, a very similar text was created already 2000 years ago by Phlegon. He is probably the only ancient author who wrote about male parturition.

Sensational news is always looked at by readers and critics as something suspicious in content and unethical in writing, making it questionable, whether they may have any value or even whether they consist simply of a collection of flat lies. It is easy to cross-check the truth of a story in contemporary times, as even a simple reader has access to a tremendous variety of alternate, independent information sources.

However, checking the truth content of stories told by ancient writers is fundamentally different from that of actual boulevard journalism, as for such old findings only information fragments are available as a basis for comparison. Moreover, even if there are other relevant sources about a particular subject available, these pieces of information may be distorted by the very nature of information dissemination in the ancient world.

One of the most important ways to check the authenticity of a finding is to examine its core subject from the point of view of scientific feasibility, thus bringing a scientific proof evaluating whether the event described could have

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jul/04/usa.gender>. July 4, 2008. Written by James Orr.

happen at all. This way, it is worth evaluating even the most sensational tales from a scientific point of view. Although some exaggeration is a joint characteristic of both old and brand new texts, even Phlegon's text might originate from a real background – as the above article has a truth core.

Phlegon was born in Asia Minor, in Tralleis and he was a freedman of emperor Hadrian.² His book entitled *Book of Marvels* (*Περὶ θαυμασίων*) is a prominent example of paradoxography, the genre dealing with wondrous or inexplicable phenomena. His book contains altogether 35 stories covering different tale-like topics – revenants and ghosts, intersexual people, findings of giant bones, monstrous births etc. – out of which two inform us about male individuals allegedly giving birth.

Although Phlegon is considered as a representative of the genre 'paradoxography' and thus being similar to a pure fictionist storyteller who creates fabulous and interesting stories with no intention of telling the truth, I still believe that there must be some real basis for his stories. While other authors – the most prominent of whom is Pliny the Elder – are considered as a forerunner of anthropology,³ Phlegon who wrote about very similar topics is still thought to be an author of pure fiction solely because of being labelled as a paradoxographer. However the difference between them lies in their degree of exaggeration and not in the choice of topics.

Phlegon should not be regarded as the author of fairy tales for adults. His popularity indicates a wide audience of adults who – similarly to people nowadays – were interested in and fascinated by seemingly true stories more than in obviously fictitious ones. Thus Phlegon's aim was to engage these people's interest by creating stories around some real kernel of truth and scaling it up to make it even more interesting.

He wrote about so-called sex-changers as well – usually young girls who allegedly changed sex at a certain point in their lives. There are six stories, two of which describe the sex changes of mythological people, Teiresias and Kainis. However these are not addressed here, as these cases can be deduced to other medical problems if they have a real background, at all.

I assume that his stories about male pregnancies were not entirely imaginary. His description reads as follows:

² Phlegon's detailed biography in: *K. Brodersen* (ed.), *Phlegon von Tralleis – Das Buch der Wunder*. Darmstadt 2002, 9-15; *W. Hansen* (ed.), *Phlegon of Tralles' Book of Marvels*. Exeter 1996, 1-22.

³ *H. Schipperges*, *Zur Anthropologie des Plinius*. In: *C. Plinius Secundus: Naturkunde*. Buch VII: *Anthropologie*. Ed. and transl. by *R. König-G. Winkler*. München 1975, 301.

(26.) A Homosexual

The doctor Dorotheos⁴ says in his Reminiscences that in Egyptian Alexandria a male homosexual⁵ gave birth, and that because of the marvel the newborn infant was embalmed and is still preserved.⁶

(27.) A Slave

The same thing occurred in Germany in the Roman army, which was under the command of Titus Curtilius Mancias: a male slave⁷ of a soldier gave birth. This happened while Konon was archon in Athens and Quintus Volusius Saturninus and Publius Cornelius Scipio⁸ were consuls in Rome.⁹

Male pregnancy was a popular topic in the Greek mythology. Zeus swallowed the pregnant Metis and later Athene burst out of his father's forehead (Fig. 1.) according to a version transmitted by Hesiod,¹⁰ Dionysos was carried to term in his father's thigh. Kronos too swallowed down his children and carried them until Zeus made him disgorge his siblings.¹¹ It seems that in mythology the same topic can be found in other cultural surroundings as well, e.g. in Hurrite mythology: The Hurrian god Kumarbi bit off the genitals of his father,

⁴ His works have not survived. Different references suggest that he must have lived before 1st century AD, thus this particular case can be assumed to be about that time (cf. Hansen, op. cit. [note 2] 159).

⁵ The word Hansen translates with the term homosexual is in the Greek original text *κίναιδος* of the exact meaning 'lewd fellow' according to the LSJ, but in this context it must refer to the passive (also called the *ἐρώμενος*) partner in a homosexual intercourse. Winkler states that the *κίναιδος* was by no means a homosexual but rather „a man socially deviant in his entire being, principally observable in behavior that flagrantly violated or contravened the dominant social definition of masculinity“, „a man who likes to lose... The kinaidos simply and directly desires to be mastered.“ (J.J. Winkler, The constraints of desire. The anthropology of sex and gender in ancient Greece. New York-London 1990, 45-46. and 54) Fisher however describes *κίναιδοι* as men who preferred forms of sex more appropriate for women or slaves and also feminine styles in dress, hair etc. (N. Fisher, Introduction. In: N. Fisher, Aeschines: Against Timarchos. Oxford 2001, 48).

⁶ The text's reference to the baby „The infant was embalmed“ means that the child was either born dead, or died shortly after birth or was killed in order to put it on display as something extraordinary. This was very common in ancient times, we have reports on different (once) animate and inanimate items that were shown in public or private collections (cf. Hansen, op. cit. [note 2], 170-176).

⁷ It was certainly the male slave who played the passive role during intercourse in the second case, which is underpinned by his subordinate social role of a slave. I assume that the slave might have been either an intersexual person with predominantly female characteristics or a masculine woman or perhaps even a girl disguised as a male for some reason.

⁸ The event can be dated to 56 AD. As Phlegon always groups his stories of similar topics in chronological order, it can be assumed that the second story (27) happened later than the first one (26).

⁹ Transl. by Hansen, op. cit. (note 2).

¹⁰ Hesiod, *Theogony* 886-929.

¹¹ Hesiod, *Theogony* 161-210, 453-500.

An(ush) and he became impregnated with three children who were delivered through his different body openings.¹²

However, the Phlegonian stories differ from the above scheme: heterosexual male gods deliver children in the Greek mythology that were conceived in female divinities. The only function of these gods is to carry the embryo. On the other hand Phlegon writes about homosexual males who became pregnant and were later able to carry the child of two men.

I assume that one of the possible explanations is that they were seemingly intersexual women having functioning wombs but regarded as men due to their masculinized genitals. Such genitals can vary on a wide range: clitoris hypertrophy, phallus-like clitoris (micropenis), scrotum like labia majora, or seemingly masculine penises with a void scrotum.¹³

Maybe these people were born as intersexuals originally of masculine features but at a certain point female secondary sex characteristics started to dominate. Thus it is only a question of viewpoint if society regards these people as males or females. Several cases are documented in which intersexual or pseudo-intersexual people gave birth.¹⁴

The most probable option is that the stories are about people with *pseudo-hermaphroditismus femininus* with functioning ovaries and uteri, who have masculine external genitals. Prenatal virilization might be due to placental hormone disorders in the female embryo as a consequence of which masculinization takes place during the sexual differentiation.¹⁵ In the case of the mother, certain diseases with androgene overproduction (e.g. because of tumors in the organs producing androgene) may cause virilisation in the embryo. The most common cause for this disease is a hereditary enzyme defect of the adrenal glands in the fetus.¹⁶ This disease might appear relatively widespread even in ancient times. Although fertility is rare for people of intersexual gender, pregnancy might still have occurred in certain cases.

Another, more straightforward explanation of these stories would be assuming masculine women as subjects of them. As nowadays, although certainly sporadically, even in ancient times it could have happened that a woman of masculine appearance was thought to be a man. Rarely not only men but women too were classified into two groups, namely manly women and femi-

¹² S. Trzaskoma–R. Scott Smith–S. Brunet (eds.), *Anthology of Classical Myth: Primary Sources in Translation*. Indianapolis 2004, 130.

¹³ Z. Papp (ed.), *A szülészet-nőgyógyászat tankönyve* [Course book on Gynecology-Obstetrics]. Budapest 2007, 98.

¹⁴ G. M. Gould – W. L. Pyle, *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine*. New York 1964, 207-212.

¹⁵ Papp, op. cit. (note 13), 99.

¹⁶ Papp, op. cit. (note 13), 98-100.

nine women. Aristotle calls dark-skinned women masculine and light-skinned women as feminine.¹⁷ The *Diseases of Women* which is a part of the Hippocratic Corpus (1.6.) supposes that man-like women are healthier, and less given over to maternity and conception,¹⁸ which does not contradict my supposition since there might be exceptions to it.

Apparently all the stories told by Phlegon are proven to be feasible in terms of medical science. However, we cannot prove that they actually did happen only that the sensational stories may have some core of truth. The interesting consequence can be drawn that extraordinary events were of a similar interest to the public as nowadays. The other straightforward conclusion is that Phlegon followed the very same way in creating his stories of extraordinary events as the creators of Greek mythology: something beyond everyday experience as a starting point and creating a human context in order to make it simultaneously sensational but believable.



Fig. 1.: Birth of Athena out of the forehead of his father Zeus
(black-figured amphora, 550-525 BC, Louvre, Paris.)

¹⁷ GA 728^a 3-5

¹⁸ J.J. Winkler, op. cit. (note 5), 50.