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An Extraordinary Birth in the Context of Similar Roman Prodigies: Macrosomia in a Hermaphroditic Newborn at Frusino, 207 B.C.

The Romans reveal a particularly intense, anxious curiosity and sensitivity to abnormal and unnatural events and things, such as hermaphrodite newborns. They considered such prodigies, mishaps and monstrosities as full of religious significance, as signs betokening an unhealthy state of affairs in the commonwealth, as manifestations of divine displeasure and as omens of imminent or future adversity. In case of their occurrence elaborate rituals of appeasement, atonement and aversion had to be enacted in the form, and with divine addressees, prescribed by relevant sacred authorities.

The monumental history of the Roman state by Titus Livius (from Patavium = Padua, his life spanned the turbulent years of the end of the Republic and the first five decades of the Empire, about 59 B. C. to 17 A. D.) is teeming with relations of this kind, carefully registered and accurately, if summarily, identified.

Among portents of this ominous kind there are often enumerated cases of hermaphroditism in men or animals. In such cases, reacting to the incidents as so many monstrous abominations, public feeling condoned the cruel disposal of the ill-starred subjects which was in later times standardly part of the rites of placation and propitiation of hostile or offended cosmic powers. Thus, in 209 B.C. at Sinuessa a child was born “of ambiguous sex, between a male and a female, such as are commonly called Androgynes, a term derived from the Greek language, which is better adapted, as for most other purposes, so for the composition of words” (Livius, XXVII, 11, 4-5 [1]). Similarly in 206 B.C. “at Caere... a lamb had been yeaned which was both male and female” (Livius XXVIII, 11, 3 [2]). And in 200 B.C., “Besides, monstrous births of animals were reported to have occurred in many places. In the country of the Sabines, an infant was born whose sex was doubtful; and another was found, sixteen years old, of doubtful sex” (Livius XXXI, 12, 4 [3]). By now, the public feeling had been incensed, and such irregularities of nature, those especially pertaining to the nature of sex, were considered as abominations.

Consequently, the hermaphrodites were drowned in the sea – the element which purifies all enormities [4]. We should be reminded that the period was one in which Rome, in her ascent to the World-Dominion, was engaged in an existential struggle against the Great Powers of the time, Carthage and Macedonia.

Another instance of hermaphroditism, and this one of major medical interest, is reported by the same historian a few years earlier than the last mentioned case.

In the year 207 B.C. there seems to have happened a singularly heavy row of fearful prodigies. Among them there was also the standard culprit, a case of androgynism of a very special character. “After the people’s minds had been freed from religious fears, they were again disturbed by intelligence that an infant had been born at Frusino as large as a child of four years old, and not so much an object of wonder from its size as that it was born formed in such a way that it was uncertain whether it was male or female, which was also the case two years before at Sinuessa” (Livius, XXVII, 37, 5 [5]). Frusino was a middling city of Latium, the original Latin region in the area southeast of Rome, and it was located along the Via Latina at about the distance of 95km from the Eternal City. It seems to have been originally a Volscian city, related also to the neighbouring Hernicans. Later it received a Roman colony. Cicero appears to have possessed a farm in its territory (ad Atticum, xi, 4, 13). It was noted for its rocky situation and the hardy character of its inhabitants (Silius Italicus, Punicorum, viii 398; xii 532)

This Frusino case is one of a macrosomic hermaphroditic newborn and can have an appropriate medical differential diagnosis.

NOTES

[1] “Et... satis constabat... et Sinuesse natum ambiguo inter narem ac feminam sexu infantem, quos androgynos volgus, ut pleraque, faciliore ad duplicanda verba Graeco sermone appellat”.

[2] “Caere... et agnus mas idem feminaque natus erat”.

[3] “Iam animalium obscoeni foetus pluribus locis nuntiabantur. In Sabinis incertus infans natus, masculus an femina esset; alter sexdecim iam annorum item ambiguo sexu inventus”.

[4] Livy explains: “All these were considered as horrid and deformed, and as if nature were straying to strange productions. Above all, the half-males were particularly abominated, and they were ordered to be immediately thrown into the sea, as had been lately done with a production of the same monstrous kind, in the consulate of Caius Claudius and Marcus Livius”.

[“Foeda omnia et deformia, errantisque in alienos foetus naturae visa. Ante omnia abominati semimares, iussique in mare extemplo deportati; sicut proxime, C. Claudio, M. Livio consulibus, deportatus similis prodigii foetus erat” (Livius XXI, 12, 4). Livy then goes on to relate the expiations, supplications and litanies that in the sequel were officially performed in order to cure the body-politic from the molestation of such sex abnormalities.

[5] “Liberatas religione mentes turbavit rursus nuntiatum Frusimone natum esse infantem quadrimo parem nec magnitudine tam mirandum quam quod is quoque, ut Sinuessae biennio ante, incertus mas an femina esset natus erat”. - What was done about it is related in detail by Livy: “Aruspices, called in from Etruria, declared this to be indeed a foul and perverted prodigy,

which ought to be removed out of the Roman territory, and, being kept far from coming into contact with the earth, to be plunged into the deep. They shut it up alive in a chest, and carrying it away, threw it into the sea. The Pontiffs also decreed, that thrice nine virgins should go through the city singing a hymn. While in the temple of Jupiter Stator they were learning this hymn, which was composed by the poet Livius, etc.” (For there occurred further ominous events and the rites of appeasement were in consequence still more complicated to answer to the exigencies of these events, but also in response to a formidable danger for the State). Livius XXVII, 37, 6-7: [“Id vero haruspices ex Etruria acciti foedum ac turpe prodigium dicere; extorrem agro Romano, procul terrae contact, alto mergendum. Vivum in arcam condidere proventunque in mare proiecerunt. Decevere item pontifices ut virgines ter novena per urbem euntes carmen canerent. Id cum in Iovis Statoris aede discerent conditum ab Livio poeta carmen etc.”]. The litany of the virgins singing the hymn of Livius is described in the sequel loc.cit. §§ 11-15. (Cf. Festus, de Verborum Significatione, s.v. scribas).

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