

Ancient Uterine Amulets and Women's Struggle for Agency in Obstetrics

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Traditionally, women maintain the most expertise surrounding pregnancy and childbirth, yet patriarchal oversight has repeatedly deprived women of power over their bodies throughout these processes. Magical uterine amulets, dated between the 1st century and 5th century AD, seem to innocently depict female wishes for successful pregnancy. However, they are a vital piece of women's constant struggle to achieve authority concerning their reproductive organs. In a world in which male expertise dominated information surrounding women's reproductive health, uterine amulets represented a unique way for women in antiquity to empower themselves in the face of daunting childbirth. Thus, these small stones, while oft overlooked, symbolized a considerable challenge to ancient women's exclusion from the worlds of gynecology and obstetrics.

Across the vast period within which these uterine amulets have been dated, the voices of male physicians dominated discourse about gynecology and obstetrics. All medical texts preserved on female reproductive health, pregnancy, and childbirth from this period are male-authored. Two of the most influential gynecological works from this period of antiquity are Soranus of Ephesus' *Gynaikeia* and Muscio's *Gynacia*, dated to 1st century AD or 2nd century AD and 4th century AD, respectively. Muscio's *Gynacia* is mostly a Latin translation of *Gynaikeia*, but it is much shorter, and current records of it are much more complete. Additionally, it follows a question-and-answer format intended to be studied by female midwives, featuring illustrations presumed to be the original work of Soranus himself (Marchetti 12). When justifying the changes he made to *Gynaikeia*, Muscio wrote, "when I saw how large the work was to be, and that women's spirits could for this reason quickly become exhausted because of the size of it, I decided to follow the brevity of the Cateperotiana" (Ilberg 74-88). Muscio's writings provide evidence that although female midwives were widely accepted in this

age and culture, they were always subordinate to male physicians and this male-authored medical research. Moreover, male physicians did not take into account the perspectives of women, mothers, and female midwives when writing texts such as this. Instead, they perceived them as ignorant of their own bodily functions and requiring excessively simplified instruction to assist in these medical practices, even when those women were well-educated. These texts of Soranus and Muscio were vital to the development of gynecology and obstetrics, but they reveal the stark lack of agency that women of this time had in their own reproductive health.

The five uterine amulets I examined directly conflicted with male expertise on gynecology and obstetrics, yet they remained popular among diverse groups of women across geographic, ethnic, and socioeconomic boundaries. Within my studies, I particularly focused on 26067 (Figure 1) at the Kelsey Museum, a hematite amulet which included most of the vital elements featured in the other five. All of the uterine amulets I examined were traced to Ancient Egypt between 1st and 5th century AD, but these amulets have been discovered all across the former Greek and Roman empires. Soranus disregarded uterine amulets as powerless in his *Gynaikeia*. He wrote that "amulets employed to staunch uterine hemorrhage through their antipathy (...) are equally ineffective, although their use should not be forbidden, since the hope they provide possibly makes the woman more cheerful" (Cited in "Setting the Womb in Its Place" Marino 21). Soranus would not have known about or bothered to mention these amulets unless they were relatively wide-spread, coinciding with archeological evidence that uterine amulets were incredibly popular among women in first century Egypt. These amulets' popularity even spread to ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and other neighboring areas. Similarly, the inscriptions on many of these amulets are made up of Greek and Egyptian characters, along with vocales reminiscent of Greek or combinations of these – with the latter being most frequent. This

signifies that despite Soranus' opinion that these amulets held no valid use and concurring opinions from other prominent male physicians, they were still widely supported by women from many varying backgrounds. I argue that this is because these uterine amulets provided women with a unique form of empowerment regarding their reproductive health – supported by Soranus' own statement that they provided 'hope', which made women' more cheerful'. Uterine amulets were evidently an extraordinary object that enabled women to adopt agency in reproductive processes, an unusual power that they were usually deprived of.

The symbols featured on these uterine amulets further prove that they served the vital role of empowering women in antiquity through processes of reproduction, pregnancy, and childbirth, which were dominated by male research and philosophy. One of the most intriguing symbols featured on every amulet I examined was that which represented the uterus, resembling an upside-down vase. Throughout the time period that these uterine amulets were popularly used, the uterus was widely understood to be a creature residing within women. In *Studies in Magical Amulets*, Campbell Bonner states that "This notion of the womb as a thing having a life of its own, and moving freely within the body, is not only deeply rooted in the beliefs of certain peoples, but is also very old" (Bonner 91). Bonner proceeds to specify that although certain authors of medicine denied this depiction, many from this time agreed with and reinforced it. One example is the Hippocratic authors, whom Bonner claims diagnosed 'hysterical disorders' as the result of extreme movements of the uterus. This notion of the uterus as a separate creature that is not under the control of its female host entirely removes women's agency throughout the processes of reproduction, also implying that they are too weak to maintain control over these bodily functions. Moreover, the proposed connection between 'hysterical disorders' and the movement of a separate uterus by the Hippocratic authors discredited women's emotions and

their ability to understand their own bodily functions. Since dissection of human corpses was deemed desecration in Greek and Roman cultures of this time period, these gynecological authors were likely unaware of what female reproductive organs truly looked like; however, it was no coincidence that the uterus was portrayed as an irrational – almost monstrous – creature that women could not control. This popular belief blatantly coincides with sexist stereotypes that women were an irrational and lesser form of human, even supporting arguments that they were created to be subordinate to men. Due to this popular understanding that a woman's uterus was a creature beyond their control, women were forced to seek other means to reassert agency over their reproductive organs. One of these methods was likely through uterine amulets, which were frequently inscribed with this symbol of the uterus alongside many representations of control and power.

Another prominently featured symbol on these amulets was that of a key, connoting opening and closing. This symbol was closely connected to the symbol for the uterus; in almost all uterine amulets from this age of Egypt the key was inscribed with various numbers of teeth facing upwards toward the opening of the uterus. This can be seen in figures 1, 2, 3, and 5 below. This key and its positioning plainly represented the opening and closing of the 'womb'. In "Setting the Womb in Its Place: Toward A Contextual Archaeology of Graeco-Egyptian Uterine Amulets" Katherine R. Marino claims that "the [uterine] amulets are genuinely concerned with controlling a wayward organ and preventing the horrible damage it could do within the body" (Marino 366). Marino argues that the symbolism of the key is heavily intertwined with the philosophy of a uterine 'creature' and establishing control over it. This association may have existed for some amulet users; however, these amulets were worn across diverse boundaries of class, geography, and education-level. Therefore, even women who did not know of or subscribe

to this uterine philosophy must have still used these amulets. This signifies that women sought control over their reproductive processes in multiple ways by using these amulets. Regardless of if the amulet-user viewed the uterus as a separate creature from themselves, the amulet represented a way for them to influence when and how they were impregnated by 'opening' or 'closing' their reproductive organs. Thus, this inscription of a key empowered ancient women with greater power over a body that most male medical experts claimed 'wasn't fully theirs'.

Similarly to this symbol of a key, the Soroor formula, also called the Soroor-logos, symbolizes opening and closing and was inscribed on many uterine amulets alongside the symbol of Ouroboros. This formula can be seen around the edge of 26067 (figure 1) on side A. In "The Magical Formula on a Lost Uterine Amulet" Edina Gradvohl explains that the Soroor formula or Soroor logos "was used for opening doors and the removal of handcuffs and it was probably this opening-closing function that was carried over to the cervix" (Gradvohl 113). Just as the symbol of the key, this formula provided women with greater control over when and how they were impregnated. The Soroor formula was also almost always depicted alongside Ouroboros, a serpent symbol from Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece that is continuously devouring itself (Ouroboros|Ancient Symbol|Britannica). Ouroboros can be seen in figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 below. Ouroboros is often used to represent the cycle of life and death, in which birth is heavily intertwined. Reproduction and pregnancy are processes very involved with the creation of life, but for many women in antiquity, they were also deeply connected to death. In ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, childbirth was a process which often resulted in death – either death of the child or of the mother. Every time a woman became pregnant she was entering into a terrifying risk of death, making establishing control over reproductive processes even more important for these women. The idea of "opening and closing" reproductive organs with the

Soroor formula alongside this cycle of life and death displays that women used these uterine amulets to regain control and feel empowered when faced with their own potential demise.

The gods featured on amulet 26067 further symbolize the concepts of birth, life, and death. The Egyptian goddess Isis or Aset can be seen depicted on the far left side of the amulet – the goddess of motherhood, fertility, healing, and magic. She traditionally symbolized the experience of birth and was referred to as the 'protector of women' (Explore Deities in Ancient Egypt | Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum). Her sister Nephthys is inscribed on the right – the goddess of air and the head of the household. Nephthys is, however, also associated with death and mourning because in some Egyptian mythology she was infertile (Explore Deities in Ancient Egypt | Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum). In other legends, however, she was instead the mother of Anubis. Anubis is the second god to the left with the face of a jackal, holding a was-scepter in his hand. At the time period that this amulet was likely created, Anubis was regarded to be the most important god of the dead. Finally, Knum sits on a throne to the right of the uterus and key symbols. Knum was mythologically regarded to be the source of the Nile river and was thus associated with water and life. He was thought to have molded children from clay into vase shapes and placed them into the womb of mothers, hence the shape of the symbol for the Uterus (The Global Egyptian Museum | Khnum). Ancient Egyptians subscribed to a belief system of divine order, in which the cycle of life, death, and the afterlife was incredibly important. All of these gods and goddesses featured on the amulet provided women with protection through reproduction, a vital part of this cycle. For women living in a time in which death or complications in childbirth was relatively common, the best option was to turn to gods or goddesses involved in this cycle of life and death for protection and strength. Thus, uterine amulets also spiritually or religiously empowered women through the arduous conception of life.

Finally, the was-scepter or w s-scepter was another symbol of power and control commonly inscribed on uterine amulets. This scepter is held by different Egyptian gods on the amulets but is most frequently held by Anubis. It can be pictured in figures 1 and 2. The symbol " " and the was-scepter both represented power, dominion, and control over chaos (Allen 579). The presence of this symbol on uterine amulets further propagates the use of these amulets as a means for women to gain greater sovereignty over their bodies. Pregnancy and childbirth are very uncontrollable processes, especially in antiquity, where complications were much more common and fatal than in contemporary society. Moreover, this lack of control was exacerbated by patriarchal oversight that dominated women's reproductive processes and education concerning them. The inscription of the was-scepter on uterine amulets provides evidence that these amulets empowered women to gain greater authority over their reproductive organs, heightening their popularity. Furthermore, these amulets quietly challenged male physicians which denied their validity and excluded women from fully participating in the medical fields of gynecology and obstetrics.

From 1st century AD to 5th century AD male physicians such as Soranus and Muscio dominated education about female reproductive health. Female exclusion from this field heightened the popularity of uterine amulets because they provided women with a unique avenue to gain greater power over their bodily processes of reproduction, pregnancy, and childbirth. The symbols inscribed on these amulets were foundational to their empowering message, including that of the uterus, a key, the Soroor formula, Ouroboros, gods or goddesses, and the was-scepter. Even over a millenia later, this power struggle subsists. In the 16th century, male physicians claimed control over childbirth through the popularization of tools like forceps. Despite numerous deaths caused by these unhygienic instruments and protests from midwives or

mothers, they continued to ignore female expertise over female reproductive processes. In the 19th century, a man widely known as the "father of gynecology", J. Marion Sims, repeatedly experimented on enslaved women without their consent to 'examine how to treat childbirth complications'. Today, in the 21st century, we have witnessed this struggle evolve as doctors across the world still perform episiotomies without informed consent and women of color continue to face disproportionate inequities in obstetrical healthcare. However, just like the ancient women that came before them, they have unearthed means to resist this patriarchal structure. Mothers have always struggled to place their trust in male-dominated gynecological research and physicians, but nevertheless they have persevered. Their methods may not continue to resemble a magical amulet, but they nonetheless enable women to reclaim agency over their reproductive health.

Figure 1



26067 Magical gem: Deities standing on uterus (A) Greek inscription (B)

Figure 2



26056 Magical gem: Uterus with deities (A) inscription (B)

Figure 3



1963.04.0009 Magical gem: Uterus with deities (A) Greek inscription (B)

Figure 4



26036 Magical gem: Uterus within Ouroboros

Figure 5



26022 Magical pendant: Reaper (A) uterus with deities (B)

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