

A R A Ş T I R M A M A K A L E S İ / R E S E A R C H A R T I C L E

DOI: 10.52122/nisantasisbd.1465871

ANCIENT ART OF WOMEN IN THE GREEK AND ROMAN WORLD: FROM
SORCERY TO CHIROPRACTIC-FROM GODDESS TO HEALER WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

Human and public health is one of the most important issues that has been going on for thousands of years. Women's participation in the field of health is seen as a very challenging issue. Even today, when women are involved in every aspect of life, this issue is discussed from time to time. However, when we go to the origin of humanity, it is understood that the only competent subject related to health is women. Since the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods, it is seen that women have observed nature well and therefore recognize poisonous and non-toxic plants; as a result of their own experience and observations, they treat diseases by using these plants. It is known from both mythology and inscriptions that women have healing characteristics in the historical process. These women sometimes appear as a goddess, sometimes as a sage, and sometimes as a physician. The aim of this study is to go to the origin of the health system, which is mostly in the service of the masculine system today, and reveal the healing aspects of women and their competencies in this regard; and also to remind women of their status and value in the period of goddesses.

Keywords: Woman, Healer, Goddess, Cure, MagicianYUNAN VE ROMA DÜNYASINDA KADININ KADİM SANATI: BÜYÜCÜLÜKTEN
ŞİFACILIĞA TANRIÇADAN ŞİFACI KADINA

ÖZ

İnsan ve toplum sağlığı bin yıllardan beri süregelen en önemli konuların başında yer almaktadır. Kadınların sağlık alanında yer almaları ise oldukça çetrefilli bir konu olarak görülmektedir. Kadınların yaşamın her alanında yer aldığı/almaya çalıştığı günümüzde dahi bu konu zaman zaman tartışılmaktadır. Oysaki insanlığın kökenine gidildiğinde aslında sağlıkla ilgili tek yetkin öznenin kadın olduğu anlaşılmaktadır. Paleolitik ve Neolitik dönemlerden beri kadının doğayı iyi gözlemlediği dolayısıyla zehirli ve zehirsiz bitkileri tanıdığı; kendi deneyim ve gözlemleri sonucu bu bitkileri kullanarak hastalıkları tedavi ettiği görülmektedir. Tarihsel süreç içerisinde kadınların şifacı özelliklerinin olduğu gerek mitolojiden gerek yazıtlardan bilinmektedir. Bu kadınlar, bazen bir tanrıça bazen bir bilge bazen de bir hekim olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, günümüzde daha çok eril sistemin hizmetinde olan sağlık sisteminin kökenine gidip kadınların şifacı yönlerinin ve bu konudaki yetkinliklerinin ortaya konulmasıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadın, Şifacı, Tanrıça, Tedavi, Büyücü

Geliş Tarihi/Received: 05.03.2024

Kabul Tarihi/Accepted: 02.05.2024

Yayın Tarihi/Printed Date: 30.06.2024

Kaynak Gösterme: Uslu Azarak, L. (2024). "Ancient Art of Women in the Greek and Roman World: from Sorcery to Chiropactic-from Goddess to Healer Woman". *İstanbul Nişantaşı Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 1(12) 246-256.

INTRODUCTION

It is recognised that magic, which is a cultural system created around the practices that people claim to be able to influence the natural world with supernatural and mystical methods, had significant effects on prehistoric communities along with religion (Reyhan ve Cengiz, 2014: 105-115). As is known from prehistoric archaeological and written sources, it is understood that healing and sorcery in the form of traditional medical treatment was a mission carried out by goddesses and their manifestations in society, women.

Healing is a state of curing that primarily ensures the treatment of the soul in the management of disease and perceives health within the integrity of the soul and body (Kaplan, 2015: 189-196). Healing is based on intellectual and spiritual foundations rather than technical knowledge; it is recognised that "body, mind and spirit" are inseparable parts of the human being and that any healing service covers these three elements (Achterberg, 2009: xviii; Kaplan, 2015: 189-196). As can be seen, the basis of healing in folk medicine is based on the improvement of both mental and physical health as a complementary method. Like folk medicine, healing is passed down from generation to generation and learnt through traditional methods in a master-apprentice relationship (Kaplan, 2015: 189-196).

In the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods, while the position of the goddess was quite good, it is observed that the position of the woman was also good. The goddesses, who continued to exist from the Palaeolithic to the late Roman period and from whom every kind of help was sought, also attract attention with their healing aspects. Although it is not clearly known how a woman who observes nature well knows which plant is good for which disease - whether by inspiration or by doing and living - it is known that she knows and applies treatment methods as a result. For it is known that healing prescriptions are abundant in nature and that "antiseptics¹", "analgesics²", diuretics³ and "emetics⁴" are found all over the earth. Furthermore, it is a known fact that there are weeds in nature that stop blood flow and reduce fever, and that nature offers many tools and equipment for surgery and various studies on the human body (Achterberg, 2009: 3). Observing with the ability to make discoveries in the infinite depths of the human mind, the first people are understood to have made creative liquids (elixirs) and healing rituals in order to sustain life and maintain health. In the period in question, women were considered the source of wisdom and power; by searching for the healing magic stored in the earth and in the human mind, women undertook the task of caring for the sick, giving birth and comforting their loved ones on their last journey (Achterberg, 2009: 4).

In addition to the general characteristics of goddesses in different geographies and cultures in prehistoric periods, it is seen that being a "healer" is a common feature. Even though the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Anatolian, Greek and Roman goddesses were in different geographies, such as Isis, Sekhmet in Egypt; Inanna, Ishtar, Gula in Mesopotamia; Kybele, Kubaba, Hapat in Anatolia; Hera, Demeter, Artemis, Athena, Hygeia in Greece; Juno, Ceres, Diana, Minerva, Magna Matuta, Magna Mater, Salus, Fortuna in Rome, all of them have similar characteristics in terms of healing. For the sake of limiting the subject, the healing aspect of the goddesses is mentioned in general terms, the traces of female healers in Greek literature -especially in the works of Homer- and in the Roman world are traced, the "healing tradition" is discussed in general terms, the healing, healing aspect of women is emphasised, and it is examined that in later periods, in connection with the position of women, the "healing" side was suppressed and handled more with the phenomenon of "witchcraft".

1. From Mother Goddess to Sorcery

Since the Palaeolithic period, due to the fertility of women, the first human communities have blessed the women and thought that this situation was a miracle by looking at the milk flowing from her breasts, fertility, and the ability of the body to bleed and refresh during menstruation

¹ Killing bacteria

² Painkiller

³ Helps urination

⁴ Makes one puke

(Aydingün, 2013: 43; Uslu, 2018: 4). The emergence of a living creature from a woman's body, the ability to feed it with her own milk; in addition, the fact that her milk has an antibiotic effect against diseases, making the woman more specialised than the man, thus this innate feature of the woman, giving her a superiority, the belief in the cult of the Mother Goddess emerged with the idea of being a woman who gave birth to the creator (Aydingün, 2013: 11-28; Uslu, 2018: 4). In addition, the people of the Palaeolithic period observed nature well and associated the Mother Goddess cult with abundance and fertility by linking the soil-seed connection with the woman's body (Aydingün, 2013: 11-28). The identification of the woman with the earth-nature brought with it knowledge of nature.

It is understood that each of the goddesses in Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Anatolian, Greek and Roman cultures had the role of a healer; Isis, Sekhmet; Kybele, Inanna, Ishtar, Gula, Arinna; Hera, Athena, Artemis, Demeter, Hygieia; Mater Matuta, Magna Mater etc. goddesses were healers.

In Egypt, goddesses such as Isis, Sekhmet, etc. were believed to cure diseases. In Mesopotamia, it is known that Gula guided the medical arts and was effective in the treatment of health problems that doctors, and dentists usually attributed to supernatural causes (Böck, 2014: 11). It is known that Gula stands out with her healing properties; she has knowledge of medicinal and poisonous plants and uses dreams for wisdom and diagnosis (Achterberg, 2009: 13). Inanna, who was associated with love, healing, and birth, was worshipped as the Queen of Heaven and Earth (Achterberg, 2009: 12). Ishtar was also known as a loving and healing goddess (Achterberg, 2009: 13). In the Hittites, Arinna was also the goddess of health in addition to her many characteristics, as in other goddesses. For instance, it is known that Puduhepa, the wife of Hattusili III, prayed and made offerings to the Sun Goddess Arinna for her husband (Bryce, 2003: 152; Şimşek, 2021: 303-314). The goddess Kamrusepa (Katahzipuri) helped women during labour (Ay, 2012: 47; Şimşek, 2021: 303-314).

Due to the scarcity of sources providing information on medicine and physicians in Anatolia during the Hittite period, it is assumed that the practices here developed as in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Cuneiform texts show that magic and religion were important in terms of medical methods. (Erginöz, 1999: 124; Ay, 2012: 47; Şimşek, 2021: 303-314). Medicine obtained from plants was mixed with water or beer in Mesopotamia, Egypt and Anatolia, and a treatment method was applied by making the patient drink or take a bath; magic rituals were also performed for treatment; because it is known that magical practices as well as plants are known as healing methods (Şimşek, 2021: 303-314).

It is also possible to see healing goddesses in the Greek and Roman world. The functions of the goddesses in Mesopotamia, Egypt and Anatolia are divided among the goddesses in the Greek and Roman world, but all goddesses have similar abilities in terms of healing. When we look at the healing properties of the goddesses in Greece and Rome; Demeter, who protects children and women; Persephone, who heals teeth and eyes; Genetyllis, who treats women who have problems due to infertility; Athena, who cures blindness; Artemis, who helps during childbirth; Circe, Leto, Eiliethyia etc. with her knowledge of poison and antidote (Hurd-Mead, 1938: 29-32; Achterberg, 2009: 34). Hera or Juno (her Roman equivalent) is considered to be the chief healer (Achterberg, 2009: 34; Hurd-Mead, 1938: : 29-32; Aydemir, 2019: 55-74). Hecate used to heal children by making them drink the herb " Dogbane" when they had a fever during the teething period (Hurd-Mead, 1938: 30-32; Aydemir, 2019: 55-74). It is also seen that the women of the Aeschlepios family, Epione, the wife of Aeschlepios, and his two daughters Hygieia and Panakeia stood out with their healing abilities and each of them had a "kadukeus"⁵. It is known that Greek female healers were mostly snake keepers, as in Cretan, Egyptian and many other cultures. For example, Hygieia is usually depicted with a vessel in her hand, in which she feeds the snake nestled next to her. The continuity of the snake motif, which symbolises the healing energy of females, is seen in female healers, because it is known that snakes have the ability to heal patients during healing rituals, for example, snakes were trained to lick the eyelids and wounds of patients (Achterberg, 2009: 35).

⁵ Kadukeus: A staff coiled by a snake symbolizing medicine (Achterberg, 2009, p. 35).

At Delphoi, which is a testament to the Greeks' belief in the skills of female healers, and which was always regarded as a place of divine powers, once identified with Gaia, prophecies were given by a knowing priestess named "Pythia", perched on a stool with a python snake coiled around her. The believers of Pythia came from far away in processions to learn the prophecies and to be treated, and the necessary treatments were provided for the recovery of the diagnosed disease. As a treatment method, medicinal herbs, baths, physical education, water from sacred springs, laxatives, cupping, and other procedures were performed in these temples (Achterberg, 2009: 37). Today, it is known that these treatments are still popular among the people as an alternative.

It is observed that there were healing goddesses in Rome as well. It is witnessed that most of the goddesses in the Roman pantheon were imported and that the Romans sought help from the gods of other cultures to whom they promised sanctuaries in return for their favours. Among the goddesses imported from the Greeks, Juno is understood to be the chief goddess of births; Diana, for pregnancy and childbirth; Minerva, general protector and healer, curing ear diseases; Salus, a healer goddess identified with the Greek Hygieia (Hurd-Mead, 1938: 29-32; Achterberg, 2009: 38; Aydemir, 2019: 55-74). Mater Matuta is associated with fertility as an opener of the womb and is known as the protector of nursing mothers (Carol, 2019: 4; Lomas, 2018: 64; Achterberg, 2009: 41).

It is known that Magna Mater, imported from Anatolia, was a goddess who could create and cure diseases, who had a say over life and death, and whom infertile women begged for fertility. In addition, according to the Romans, this goddess, who had the power of magic, could cure various diseases with a variety of spells (Jane, 1925: 486; Aydemir, 2019: 55-74). Another healer goddess in Rome is Bona Dea. In the temple of Bona Dea (Adkins 284), who represented fertility, longevity, and health, full of snakes on the Aventine Hill, herbal treatments for infertility were performed only by female physicians (Hurd-Mead, 1938: 48-49; Aydemir, 2019: 55-74). Ferona was another Roman goddess who was a healer who allowed fertilisation (Monaghan, 2014: 271).

As can be seen, all healing goddesses seem to be more concerned with women's health, birth and postnatal protection.

2. Healer Women in Greek Literature

It is seen that women healers are occasionally included in Greek literature. Especially in the works of Homer, who is considered to be the foundation of the Greek education system, it is possible to see women healers. From time to time, it is probable to come across women healers in theatre works; however, in these pieces, women healers, such as Medea, the protagonist in Euripides' "Medea", are mostly seen as malicious and sorceresses, contrary to Homer. It should not be surprising to see that the once goddess, the healer woman, has evolved into a sorceress in the patriarchal order over time.

Homer, who is accepted as the basis of Greek literature, illuminates many issues related to the Greek world with his works "Iliad" and "Odyssey", and when we look at the female sorcerers/healers in Homer's works in general terms as the subject of the study; it is seen that characters such as Helena, Circe, Agamede are handled as sorcerers-healers (Homeros, Odyssey, 2006; Homeros, Iliad, 2014). In short, when we look at the characters in question, the common characteristic of all of them is that they are healers. It is seen that these female healers have a deep knowledge of herbs and magic. Homer's women healers are analysed in general terms below.

2.1. Helena

Helena, one of the female protagonists of the Iliad epic and the wife of King Menelaos of Sparta, who later fled to Troy with Paris, is understood to be one of the most famous women of the ancient period and the subject of many legends and myths. However, she is mostly known from Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey" (Homer, 2014: 170-175; Uslu, 2018: 21).

Helena, who stayed in Egypt for a while with Menelaos after the Trojan War, benefited from the vast knowledge of Polydamna, an Egyptian healer, in the field of medicine, and with the medical

knowledge she obtained from Egypt, she gave Telemakhos, the son of Odysseus and Penelope, a medicine that took away his anger, made him forget his pain and calmed him by mixing it with wine (Homer, 2014: 170-175; Uslu, 2018: 21), emphasising the healing aspect of Helena. Plutarch believes that this medicine was a drink-medicine called "nepenthe" consisting of a mixture of verbena, hemlock and wine; according to Discordes and Galen, this mixture was obtained from a root called "oinopia"; some researchers believed that it was datura, opium or primrose (Cited in Achterberg, 2009: 34). It is noteworthy that Polydamna, an Egyptian physician and queen who transferred the Egyptian medical knowledge mentioned above to Helena, was also a woman healer. As can be seen, although they were in different geographies, it is seen that mostly women had pharmacological knowledge.

2. 2. Agamede

It is clear that Agamede, the daughter of Augeias, was another healer woman mentioned as a healer in Homer's "Iliad". Homer mentions that Agamede knew the healing properties of all the plants of the earth (Homer, 2006: 735-745; Aydemir, 2019: 55-74). In the Hellenistic period, it is thought that she was transformed into a sorceress figure like other female healers (Dickie, 2004: 23).

2. 3. Kirke

In Homer's "Odyssey", Circe turns Odysseus' men who come to his island into pigs, but Odysseus gets rid of Circe's spell by eating the herb given by Hermes. Seeing that he is not affected by the spell, Circe is afraid and tells Odysseus that he will do whatever he wants. He also asks him to turn his men back into human beings. This request is fulfilled, and Odysseus lives with him in Circe's palace for a year (Hamilton, 1997: 161). Circe releases Odysseus and his men and gives them advice that will enable them to survive (Homer, Odyssey, 2006: 179; Estin ve Laporte, 2002: 174). The main issue here is that the main ingredient of Circe's magic is the plant and that she has vast knowledge about this plant (Aydemir, 2019: 55-74); but Homer conveys this situation as something negative. The fact that Circe is shown as a sorceress suggests that women were engaged in alchemy, as they were in prehistoric times, and that Circe's possession of animals evokes the Mother Goddess, who was once known as the "Dominatrix of Animals" in Anatolia (Uslu, 2018: 32); in addition, the fact that the woman, whose healing aspect predominates here, is shown as a sorceress is understood to deny this important role of women.

2. 4. Medea

Euripides, one of the ancient Greek tragedy writers, described Medea, who represents the leading woman in his work "Medea" (Euripides, 2014), as a ruthless, evil, and magical character. According to the work, Medea is shown as a cruel and ambitious woman who caused the disaster of her family for the sake of her love and killed her children to take revenge on her husband. However, Medea was loyal and honest to her husband and saved his life, while Iason betrayed her (Uslu, 2018: 43). Euripides shows Medea as a hysterical woman and warns about what women can do if not controlled (Frayser ve Whitby, 1995: 470). Also, in Euripides' play "The Captive Melanippe".

*"Consider the place of women in religion, and I think this is the most important one,
we women take on the most crucial roles in religious ceremonies.*

The god Apollo announces his prophecies through his priestesses.

In the sacred area of Dodona,

near the place known as the Sacred Oak,

the intentions of the God Zeus

are revealed by women to people

coming from various parts of Greece..." (Lefkowitz ve Fant, 2005: 11-31; Demiralp, 2010: 1-6; Uslu, 2018: 45), emphasising that women are engaged in divination.

One can see that the aforementioned women were healers from the mixtures they made and the herbs they had in their possession; however, it is seen that this aspect - except for Helena⁶ - is reflected as a negative feature and it is emphasised that they were only engaged in witchcraft.

3. Mortal Healer Women in the Greek and Roman World

Most of the women who practised the art of healing seem to have been from aristocratic families. Pliny mentioned many women who wrote medical books. Artemisia, Elephantis, Lais, Agnodike, Aspasia are just a few of these healer women (Pliny, 1951: 81).

Elephantis is known for her knowledge of gynaecological diseases and cosmetics (Pliny, 1951: 81; Kühn, 1826: 416).

Lais is said to have written a book on abortion and to have cured malaria using menstrual blood (Pliny, 1951: 81-82). Galen and Celsus also mentioned women healers and utilised their prescriptions in their books. Celsus, one of the famous writers of the early Roman period, mentions that women healers were the professional healers of their time; they performed tasks such as examining urine, applying leeches and using opium water in surgeries (Celsus, 1938).

3. 1. Artemisia

It is seen that the healing aspect of Artemisia, one of the Greek queens in 350 BC, was praised by Pliny, Strabo, and Theophrastus. It is known that she discovered "Wormwood" to cure many diseases and used a flower called "Artemisia" to prevent delayed menstruation and miscarriage (Achterberg, 2009: 38; Irving, 2015: 137).

3. 2. Agnodike

It is seen that Agnodike, an Athenian physician who lived in the 3rd century BC, fulfilled her duty as a healer by disguising herself as a man because women were forbidden to be healers. It is known that Agnodike, who was very successful especially in the field of female diseases, was protected by the women she treated and escaped punishment when she was sentenced to death by the administration of the period when it was discovered that she was a woman (Hygini Fabulae, 1960: 10-13 cited in Achterberg, 2009: 38). This is an indication that women were prevented from becoming healers. It is seen that an attempt was made to create a perception that medicine or healing was a male-specific profession.

3. 3. Pythias

In the Greeks, Aristotle's wife Pythias was interested in tissue research and reproduction, and it is mentioned that she conducted research on chicken and human embryos; she also studied plants and animals with Aristotle and wrote an encyclopaedia of their observations (Achterberg, 2009: 37).

3. 4. Metrodora

It is known that the Greek healer woman Metrodora offered prescriptions to cure uterine, stomach and kidney ailments (Storti, 2018: 90; Achterberg, 2009: 38).

Galen, who was born in Pergamon in the first half of the 1st century AD, is known to have been a physician who visited many parts of the Roman Empire and collected information about the treatment methods in these places and mentioned many healing women (Kühn cited in 1826; Aydemir, 2020: 39).

3. 5. Egerasia

One of the healer women mentioned by Galen is Egerasia. Galen includes Egerasia's nephritis prescription of island onion, devil's turnip, white pepper, fruits of the cedar tree, iris root, myrrh, and wine (Achterberg, 2009: 44).

⁶ Homer spoke favorably of Helena's healing qualities.

Galen also praised *Origenia's* diarrhoea prescriptions, a woman named *Margerata* who was a surgeon in the army, a woman named *Antiochis* who was a healer specialising in spleen, chest diseases, gout, arthritis, sciatica and beauty preservation, and is known to have copied her prescriptions (Achterberg, 2009: 44).

3. 6. Octavia

Octavia, the first wife of Marcus Antony, wrote a book of prescriptions in which she recommended barley flour cooked and crushed with charcoal, perfumed with flowers, honey, vinegar and salt for toothache; and myrrh, saffron, alum, seeds of the Karaman cumin, celery and aniseed nardin oil and honey for ulcerated sore throats (Achterberg, 2009: 43).

To remove animal poisons, she recommended moxibustion, the root of Florence iris, dog brain oil, wild fig milk, dog blood, turpentine, ammonia, beeswax, oil and onion. To relieve pain, pork or goose fat, wine, cardamom seeds, rose petals, nardine oil and cinnamon were recommended; to relieve labour pains, ointment, pork fat, rose petals, cypress and wintergreen were recommended. For the treatment of hernia, cutting and splitting the intestines and putting them back in place, likewise, varicose veins were treated by cutting and splitting (Achterberg, 2009: 43).

3. 7. Aspasia

Another Roman woman healer was Aspasia. She had knowledge about childbirth, gynaecological diseases and abortion (Scarborough, 2013: 751-752). Aspasia's writings were mentioned by the later Mesopotamian Aetius (Aetius, 1901: 12-15). For the prevention of miscarriage, Aspasia recommended avoiding carriage rides, unnecessary anxiety and strenuous exercise; taking mild laxatives such as rhubarb and cabbage; and for unusually narrow birth canals, hot olive oil lotions, mallow, linseed and the oil from a swallow's nest should be applied to the vulva. For the problem of uterine prolapse, she seems to have recommended tampons made of bitumen or bitumen soaked in oil. Regarding abortion, on the thirteenth day after a missed menses, the patient was to hang, stretch, pull and shake; lift heavy loads; inject the vagina with strong herbs, take hot baths and drink a mixture of psoriasis, Artemisia, ox gall, donkey cucumber and wormwood (Aetius, 1901: 12-15; Achterberg, 2009: 44-45).

CONCLUSION

It is possible to see the respected, knowledgeable, and healing goddesses of prehistory in almost every society and culture. It is seen that these goddesses who heal diseases are mostly related to women's and children's health. For example, Demeter who protects children and women, Artemis who helps birth, Hecate who is a paediatrician, Mater Matuta who is the protector of nursing mothers, etc. It is observed that goddesses such as Inanna, Ishtar, Gula in Mesopotamia; Isis, Sekhmet in Egypt; Kybele, Kubaba, Arinna in Anatolia; Hera, Demeter, Athena, Artemis, Hecate, Hygieia in Greeks; Mater Matuta, Magna Mater, Fortuna, Bona Dea in Rome etc. come to the fore with their healing aspects. Apparently, these goddesses were the representation of these deities in the society. It is clear that women, who attracted attention with their healing skills, gradually lost their respected position in society with the evolution of matriarchy into patriarchy and in the following centuries; it is evident that they were not allowed to practice this profession, i.e., healing, by certain legal regulations, as in Greece and Rome.

It appears that in the Greek world in the 8th century BC, there were healer women such as Helena, Agamede and Circe mentioned in Homer's works, and Homer especially praises Helena, who received pharmacological information from the Egyptian Queen Polydamna. In the following centuries, of course, the presence of women healers and their pharmacological knowledge was admirable, and they are known to have provided important prescriptions for public health. In the books written by the male authors of the period (authors such as Strabo, Pliny, Celsus, Galen, etc.), one can notice that they also mention these women healers and occasionally use their prescriptions. Especially women from aristocratic families were more interested in healing. Queen Artemisia of Caria is one of them. It is recognised that women such as Agnodike, Pythias, Metrodora, Eugerasia, Octavia, Aspasia etc. were interested in healing. These women healers, who also attracted the attention of many Greek and Roman male writers,

seem to have been ignored or overlooked as time went on. However, despite all the ignorance, women healers are still preferred in public health among the people even today. Especially women who have infertility problems prefer healer women among society and this tradition continues, albeit to a lesser extent.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT**GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET****YUNAN VE ROMA DÜNYASINDA KADININ KADİM SANATI: BÜYÜCÜLÜKTEN ŞIFACILIĞA
TANRIÇADAN ŞIFACI KADINA**

İnsan ve toplum sağlığı bin yıllardan beri süregelen en önemli konuların başında yer almaktadır. Kadınların sağlık alanında yer almaları ise oldukça çetrefilli bir konu olarak görülmektedir. Kadınların yaşamın her alanında yer aldığı/almaya çalıştığı günümüzde dahi bu konu zaman zaman tartışılmaktadır. Oysaki insanlığın kökenine gidildiğinde aslında sağlıkla ilgili tek yetkin öznenin kadın olduğu anlaşılmaktadır. Paleolitik ve Neolitik dönemlerden beri kadının doğayı iyi gözlemlediği dolayısıyla zehirli ve zehirsiz bitkileri tanıdığı; kendi deneyim ve gözlemleri sonucu bu bitkileri kullanarak hastalıkları tedavi ettiği görülmektedir. Tarihsel süreç içerisinde kadınların şifacı özelliklerinin olduğu gerek mitolojiden gerek yazıtlardan bilinmektedir. Bu kadınlar, bazen bir tanrıça bazen bir bilge bazen de bir hekim olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, günümüzde daha çok eril sistemin hizmetinde olan sağlık sisteminin kökenine gidip kadınların şifacı yönlerinin ve bu konudaki yetkinliklerinin ortaya konulmasıdır.

Tarih öncesinin saygın, bilgili ve şifacı tanrıçalarını hemen hemen her toplumda ve kültürde görmek mümkündür. Hastalıkları sağaltıcı bu tanrıçaların daha çok kadın ve çocuk sağlığıyla ilintili olduğu görülmektedir. Çocukları ve kadınları koruyan Demeter, doğuma yardımcı olan Artemis, çocuk hastalıkları uzmanı Hekate, emziren annelerin koruyucusu Mater Matuta vb. Mezopotamya'da İnanna, İştâr, Gula; Mısır'da İsis, Sekhmet; Anadolu'da Kybele, Kubaba, Arinna; Grekler'de Hera, Demeter, Athena, Artemis, Hekate, Hygieia; Roma'da Mater Matuta, Magna Mater, Fortuna, Bona Dea vb. tanrıçaların şifacı yönleriyle ön plana çıktıkları görülmektedir. Bu tanrıçaların toplumdaki birer temsili oldukları anlaşılmaktadır.

Mısır'da İsis, Sekhmet vb. tanrıçaların hastalıkları iyileştirdiğine inanılmaktaydı. Mezopotamya'da Gula'nın, farmakolojik bilgilere sahip olduğu; doktorlar ve diş hekimlerinin genellikle doğüstü nedenlere atfettiği sağlık sorunlarının tedavisinde etkili olduğu bu bağlamda sağaltıcı özelliğiyle ön plana çıktığı; şifalı ve zehirli bitki bilgisine sahip olduğu, bilicilik ve tanı için rüyaları kullandığı bilinmektedir. Sevgi, şifa ve doğum olgularıyla ilişkilendirilen İnanna'ya; "Göklerin ve Yeryüzünün Kraliçesi" olarak tapınılıyordu. İştâr da aynı şekilde sevecen ve sağaltan bir tanrıça olarak biliniyordu. Hititler'de Arinna, diğer tanrıçalarda olduğu gibi birçok özelliğinin yanında sağlık tanrıçasıydı aynı zamanda. Tanrıça Kamrusepa (Katahzipuri), doğum esnasında kadınlara yardımcı olan bir tanrıçaydı.

Yunan'da MÖ 8. yy'da Homeros'un eserlerinde geçen Helena, Agamede ve Kirke gibi şifacı kadınların bulunduğu anlaşılmakta olup Homeros'un özellikle bu kadınlardan Mısır Kraliçesi Polydamna'dan farmakolojik bilgiler alan Helena'dan övgüyle söz ettiği görülmektedir. Sonraki yüzyıllarda da derin farmakolojik bilgilere ve halk sağlığı konusunda önemli reçetelere sahip şifacı kadınların varlıkları satır aralarında anlaşılmaktadır. Dönemin erkek yazarlarının (Strabon, Plinius, Celsus, Galen gibi yazarlar) yazdıkları kitaplarda da bu şifacı kadınlardan söz ettikleri ve zaman zaman onların reçetelerini kullandıkları görülmektedir. Özellikle aristokrat ailelerden olan kadınların örneğin Karya Kraliçesi Artemisia, Agnodike, Pythias, Metrodora, Egerasia, Octavia, Aspasia şifacılıkla ilgilendiği anlaşılmaktadır.

Çağlar boyunca ister tanrıça ister ölümlü yani insan olarak adlandırılın bütün bu kadınların ortak özellikleri şifacı olmalarıdır. Halk arasında sağaltıcı özellikleriyle dikkat çeken kadınlar, anaerkilliğin ataerkil düzene evrilmesiyle; binyıllar içinde toplumdaki saygın konumlarını aşama aşama kaybetmişlerdir. Tarihin başlangıcında saygın bir yeri olan ve halk sağlığı gibi önemli bir konuda ilk referans olan kadın sonraki bin yıllarda gittikçe bu alandan uzaklaştırılmış ve dışlanmış. Bu çalışmanın önemi kadınların bir zamanlar önemli farmakolojik bilgilere sahip, iyileştirme gücünün kendinde mevcut olduğu ve bu şifacı yönünün kültürel hafızasında bulunduğunu hatırlatmaktır. Geçmişleri hakkında bilgiye sahip kadınlar, özgüvenli, başarılı, karşılaştıkları problemlerin ve zorlukların üstesinden gelebilme gücünü kendilerinde bulabilmektedir.

KATKI ORANI BEYANI VE ÇIKAR ÇATIŞMASI BİLDİRİMİ

Sorumlu Yazar <i>Responsible/Corresponding Author</i>	Laleş USLU AZARAK			
Makalenin Başlığı <i>Title of Manuscript</i>	ANCIENT ART OF WOMEN IN THE GREEK AND ROMAN WORLD: FROM SORCERY TO CHIROPRACTIC-FROM GODDESS TO HEALER WOMAN			
Tarih <i>Date</i>	05.04.2024			
Makalenin türü (Araştırma makalesi, Derleme vb.) <i>Manuscript Type (Research Article, Review etc.)</i>	Araştırma Makalesi			
Yazarların Listesi / List of Authors				
<i>Sıra No</i>	Adı-Soyadı <i>Name - Surname</i>	Katkı Oranı <i>Author Contributions</i>	Çıkar Çatışması <i>Conflicts of Interest</i>	Destek ve Teşekkür (Varsa) <i>Support and Acknowledgment</i>
1	Laleş USLU AZARAK	% 100	Çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.	-