



Edward Armin Schumann
(1879- 1970)

- M.D. U. Penn 1901
- Prof Obstetrics U. Penn
- Pres Am Gyn Soc 1945-46

THE DEITIES CONCERNED WITH CHILDBIRTH AMONG
ANCIENT PEOPLES*

BY EDWARD A. SCHUMANN, M.D., PHILADELPHIA, PA.

CHILD BIRTH among primitive peoples and in the ancient civilizations was held in the greatest reverence and women about to give birth were guarded against malign influences by deities of many and various powers, each of whom possessed some special sovereignty over the exigencies of human life. In many of the older peoples strikingly similar gods were worshipped even when the races involved were geographically far removed from one another and when no evidence remains of any interchange of cultural thought. Whether the peoples concerned independently developed identical mythology or whether there was a direct transmission or inheritance of the deities from one race to another is unknown, but the latter affords the more probable hypothesis.

History consists of a succession of overwhelms of degenerate, highly developed societies by their more robust but less civilized neighbors, but while the governments and states of the weaker folk were subdued, their culture and institutions, being advanced so far beyond those of the dominant barbarians, were invariably absorbed and with more or less modification became a part of the civilization

*Read at a meeting of the Obstetrical Society of Philadelphia, February 5, 1925.

TABLE VII
RESULTS OF IRRADIATION

	1922	1923	1924	TOTAL
Total number	54	51	48	153
Number traced	37	39	16*	92
Cured	32	35	15	82
Per cent cured	86	89	93	89.1
Improved	1	1	0	2
Re-irradiation per cent				3.2
Hysterectomy per cent				6.5

*Many cases in this series too recent for follow-up.

while in 2 others there was an abdominal operation coincident with the radium application. Of 92 cases (60.1 per cent) traced, the menses stopped in 73, and continued in 19. Table VII shows that 82 patients (89.1 per cent) were cured, 2 were improved but not entirely relieved, 6 patients (6.5 per cent) required subsequent hysterectomy, 3 patients (3.2 per cent) required a second irradiation. The mortality in the series was nil. Table VIII shows the comparative figures in the two groups of cases. It should be explained that the 89.1 per cent cure for the irradiation cases means a cure was obtained from only one irradiation. Adding to this the 3.2 per cent which required reirradiation, we find that 92.3 per cent were cured by radium.

Two cases were subjected to x-ray therapy exclusively. One of these has been traced and has a satisfactory result. In 2 other cases, a sarcoma of the uterus and a carcinoma of the ovary, x-ray was used supplementary to operation.

TABLE VIII
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF OPERATION AND IRRADIATION

	OPERATION	IRRADIATION
Total number	267	153
Number traced	150	92
Percentage traced	56.1	60.1
Number cured	142	82
Percentage cured	94.7	89.1
Mortality percentage	1.1	none

CONCLUSIONS

1. The treatment of uterine fibromyomata should be undertaken only by those who are thoroughly familiar with the operative as well as the irradiation method of treatment.

2. The mortality of radium irradiation in properly selected cases has been *nil* and satisfactory results will be obtained in about 90 per cent of the cases after one treatment.

3. The mortality of uncomplicated uterine fibroids subjected to operation is rapidly approaching the vanishing point, and is *nil* in this series.

of the conqueror, his own established customs and rites being slowly submerged in great part. This explains the persistent similarity in basic religious ceremonies and in the personnel of deities among widely diversified peoples.

Exploration into the mazes of medical mythology is an illuminating pastime, well worth recommending and the identification of a widely known present-day obstetric superstition or folk practice as among the most impressive ceremonies of a long dead civilization, directs one's mind to the steady, unbroken march of human life and progress through the ages.

We learn of Astarte, the Istar of the Sumerians, who sailed majestically across the velvet Asian skies, the all Mother, the goddess of bearing, who wore as her symbol of fruitfulness the woman's girdle; of Mylitta, who had religious prostitutes under her protection and of a host of lesser divinities each with his or her special powers to be invoked on the fitting occasion.

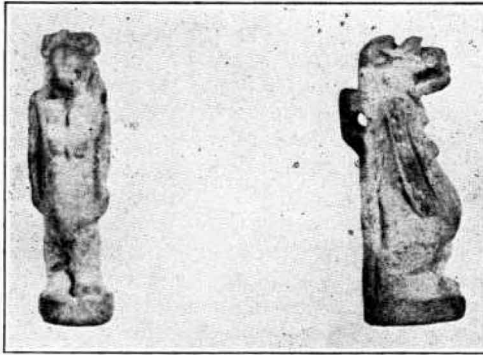


Fig. 1.—Egyptian amulet, goddess Thuseris from a tomb near Thebes.

As the ages passed, the same deification of fruitfulness was practiced by the numerous races until we find the Greeks worshipping the sea-born Aphrodite whom we call Venus.

Under whatever name and by what various rituals this deity was propitiated, the primordial principle was the same; the urge of mankind to worship the source of all fruitfulness and reproduction. From the Erda of the Norse Sagas to the Artemis of Rome, the symbol of this yearning worship was the maternal figure of a woman.

In Egypt, the science of theology was highly developed. The divinities were many in number and of accurately graded powers from the majestic moon goddess Isis, to those twilight divinities whose godhead clings very closely to the soil. Here was developed an extensive use of and faith in amulets, the little charms which kept a person from harm. Every Egyptian tomb yields a supply of these little figures, variously made of baked clay or laboriously cut from hard stones, some of them gems of craftsmanship as well as of material.

The amulet was used as evidence that its living wearer claimed the especial protection of some god; and to insure his or her favorable reception among the shades after death had carried its owner to the gloomy hereafter of the Egyptian theology, the little image was bound round the neck of his embalmed form, where it remained until the quiet of the tomb was broken by the modern despoiler.

The amulet most widely utilized to protect women in childhood was that of the goddess Thuseris who, legend holds, gave birth to the great Osiris, the mother being then called Apet. Her special function was to protect against the complications of labor and to insure to her votary the birth of a male infant. This deity is found generally in the form of a small amulet, worn only by the mummies of young adult women, probably those who died in childbed.

The possession of one of these charms taken from a tomb in Thebes, where for fifty centuries it had rested against the shriveled bosom of one who may well have been a gracious and charming matron until

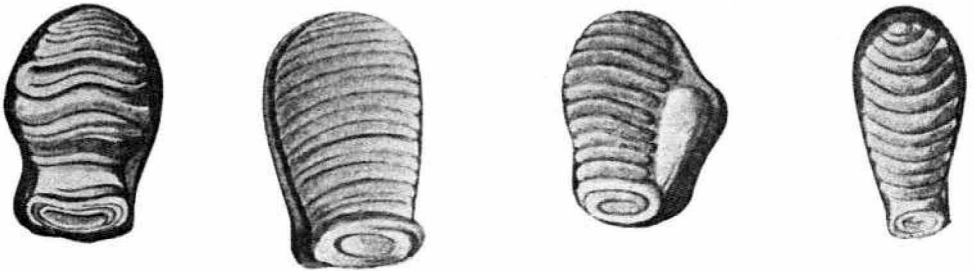


Fig. 2.—Votive offerings of terra cotta representing the uterus, one of them having an ovary attached. Rome, (after Curatola).

death cut her down at the moment of her life's fulfilment, is the inspiration of this paper. The figure is a small amulet, one and a half inches in height, made of a very hard baked clay which was originally white but has become stained and discolored by time. It represents a female seated, and having the head of a hippopotamus, long, slim, human arms, the legs short and squat, being those of the hippo. The goddess is represented as pregnant at term, the abdomen large and pendulous. There are four relaxed and pendulous breasts with well-defined nipples arranged in pairs. The image is seated on a stool with a high back, this latter pierced to receive the cord which bound the amulet round the neck of its wearer. (Fig. 1.)

Thuseris was a deity of great repute and the happy possessor of her statuette felt herself secure against whatever evils fate held in store for her.

Animals, which form so important a part of Egyptian mythology, were occasionally used as birth amulets. On some of the coffins of the Middle Kingdom were found paintings of objects made up of the

skins of foxes, some of them quite accurate consisting of the outer skin or skins attached by the mouth to a handle of leather or other material. These ornaments are represented by a hieroglyphic sign translated as *ms* or *msy*, meaning to give birth to. This belief is still extant in modern Egypt and Nubia, the skin of the fox hung over the door being supposed to protect against the danger of childbirth.

The Greeks, with their sensuous and delicate mythology, regarded amulets with much less respect, worshipping their divinities in groves and before altars which still remain as evidence to what heights in artistic endeavor the human mind and heart may achieve.

The more sturdy Romans adopted the Greek mythology in great measure, the chief deity swaying the destinies of pregnant women being the Diana of the Greeks, variously invoked as Artemis, or more

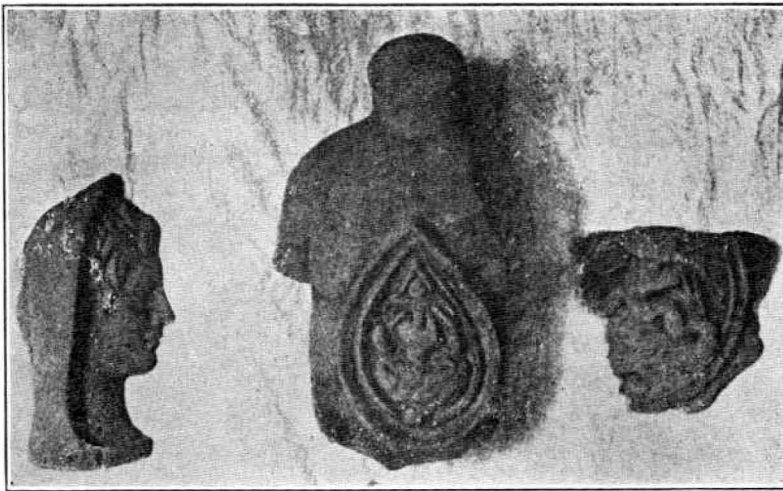


Fig. 3.—Votive offerings, Rome. The head of a goddess, abdomen showing fetus *in situ*, and an umbilical cord. (After Curatola.)

commonly Lucina, whose altars rise on the Italian hills and to whom the women of Rome brought their supplications for a safe deliverance.

While Lucina was the most powerful divinity to shield the Roman parturient woman, there were lesser deities whose aid was usually invoked, the three *Dii Nixi*, as witness Ovid:

“Lucinam, Nixosque pari clamore vocabant.” (Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, lix, U-294). These *Dii Nixi* were brought to Rome as goddesses of the lesser sort by the Consul Ocilius, after the overthrow of the Emperor Antiochus of Syria, and before they could be summoned the votary must first purify himself by hand washing and covering the head.

Siebold holds that the *Dii Nixi*, always described and depicted as kneeling figures, were also involved in Greek mythology, citing as an instance the accounts of the birth of Apollo, whose mother Latona is

represented as delivering herself in a kneeling posture, holding a palm branch in her hands.

It has already been stated that the powerful deities who sponsored childbirth in ancient Rome, had been inherited from the Greek culture and were worshipped in Rome simply under different names, although in some instances the Grecian nomenclature was retained in its entirety. It has been shown earlier in this discussion that the Greeks themselves acquired many of their gods from the Egyptians, who in turn were indebted to the Sumerians and Chaldeans for a large part of their mythology, the whole process being one of assimilation of acceptable religious cults and ceremonies by a younger people from those older civilizations which they overwhelmed by force of arms



Fig. 4.—Votive offering. Rome. A fetus in the uterus. (After Curatola.)

or absorbed by their more vigorous development. Thus we find the worship of Illitia, Hera or Artemis instead of Lucina. The goddess is, however, generally styled Juno Lucina and is represented as wearing a matron's toga, with a spear in the right hand and a shell to receive offerings in the left, or with the torch upraised for the guidance of the newborn, as she is so beautifully drawn in Rubens' "Birth of Marie de Medici." The crown of ash leaves, the plant so important in obstetric mythology, is usually prominently displayed.

The most important temple of Lucina or Diana was at Nemi by the little woodland lake of that name and to this place came the women to supplicate the divinity that they might be insured a happy termination of their labor and to bring votive offerings and coins. More than a thousand medals and coins were unearthed at this temple

upon its excavation by Lord Savile in 1885, together with many statuettes of terra cotta and bronze. In cases of difficult labor the goddess was called seven times and upon the successful outcome, gifts of silver were offered to the temple, or a young sheep, sometimes a



Fig. 5.—Votive coins and medals to Lucina and Diana. Rome.

snow white heifer was sacrificed. Many of the medals of Lucina have been preserved, some of them being very beautiful.

In one of these medallions Lucina is represented as bearing a whip of thongs of goat skin, the lash being a symbol of recovery from childbirth, a reminiscence of the feast of Lupercalia during which, in the very early days of the republic, adolescents ran through the streets of Rome lightly striking the abdomens of pregnant women

with these goat skin whips to frighten away the evil genii of difficult labor. What a curious beginning to our elaborate system of prenatal care!

The use of votive offerings and amulets is of very ancient origin, and reached a great height in Rome. Here these offerings took the form of medals and of little models in terra cotta and bronze. A commonly used figure was that of the uterus in the pregnant and non-pregnant states, its muscle fibers showing very well, and the ovary occasionally represented in fairly accurate reproduction. Others show congenital malformations and some which represent the entire pregnant abdomen with the fetus *in situ* have been unearthed. (Figs. 3, 4.)

The exact purpose of these Roman votive offerings has occasioned considerable dispute but the generally credited view is that they all are evidences of a sort of contract between the pregnant woman and her especial divinity, concerning the outcome of her delivery, and upon the goddess performing her part of the bargain, the patient paid for the service rendered by these little reproductions of her organs which had by divine aid been restored to health.

With the downfall of Rome, and the birth and spread of the two great modern religions, Christianity and Mohammedanism, the vogue of the lesser pagan gods slowly and steadily declined, their votaries became scattered and few, until today the figures which filled the spiritual world of men and women and controlled the wellsprings of human devotion have been reduced to curious antiquities upon which one may pass an idle moment in speculation and retrospect.

Times change and customs differ, but the essentials of human nature remain unaltered. With the development of science and the decline of the belief in personal and household deities, the expectant mother has changed her practice in securing protection against the perils of childbed but not her principles.

When the Egyptian woman of the fourth dynasty, sought the priest in "many templed Thebes" and from him secured a little baked clay image of the ill-favored divinity Thuseris, she prayerfully bound it round her neck and faced her travail secure in the knowledge that she would safely pass through the valley of the shadow and emerge triumphant with her man-child at her breast.

Today the woman of twentieth century America, finding herself gravid, arranges for a south-windowed room in the hospital of her choice, selects her accoucheur with due regard to her predilection for twilight sleep, prophylactic forceps or Potter version, and marches blithely through her time serene and confident in the outcome, even as was her sister 5000 years ago. Does her faith rest on a more secure foundation? I hope so.