


# Understanding the genital diseases of Ancient Anatolia in the light of the inscribed male genital offerings presented to gods

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## ABSTRACT

In the ancient Greek and Roman world, many gods and goddesses were considered to possess healing powers, and there were their temples where they could heal those who prayed. For that reason, in the ancient times, people were going to healing temples of various gods and goddesses to recover from their illnesses or grievous injuries. Sick individuals at the temples were offering some written or unwritten votive reliefs indicating their illnesses, to the gods or goddesses to ask for healing or to express gratitude after finding a cure. Among these, votive stones containing written expressions and reliefs expressing the owner's health problem held an important position. In the research on this antiquity, four inscribed votives that had a male genital organ depicted on them and that were dedicated to Anatolian gods Theos Hypsistos and Sozon, and goddesses Phileis and Ollie, were found. In this article, we aimed to study the inscribed offerings that are still on display in museums and private collections discovered during the excavations in Anatolia hosting the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations simultaneously and their possible relations with the urogenital illnesses.

**Keywords:** Ancient medicine; offerings; phallus; urogenital diseases; votive stones.

## Introduction

In the ancient Greece and Rome, gods and goddesses had temples where priest physicians and carers were serving. People who wanted to cure their illnesses and to heal their injuries went to the healing temples of these gods and goddesses for whom they believed had healing powers.<sup>[1]</sup> Among the healing gods, the most known is Asclepius, who reached the rank of the god of health and medicine. The health temples built in the name of Asclepeions, whose symbol is a serpent and who taught the medical profession, were named Asclepeions.<sup>[1-3]</sup> The Asclepeions, which spread throughout a wide geographical area between the 5th century B.C. and the 4th century A.D., functioned like antique hospitals.<sup>[4-7]</sup> Athens, Kos, Alexanderia Miletus, Aigai, and Pergamon Asclepeions were the biggest and most famous Asclepeions.<sup>[6-11]</sup>

The reasons ancient people visited temples and some other sacred places were to worship and pray, ask for help from the gods for the solution of some social problems, and most importantly, to seek cure for their health problems.<sup>[1]</sup> According to votive inscriptions and information provided by ancient authors such as Strabo (B.C. 64–A.D. 24), Pausanias (A.D. ?–180), and Aelius Aristides (A.D. 117–181), sacred places that belonged to Asclepius, Apollo, Artemis, and several local gods who were believed to provide healing were brimming with visitors who flocked from all over the ancient world.<sup>[12-16]</sup> Those who took the most important place among these visitors were undoubtedly the people who were seeking a cure for any health problem that befell them or their relatives. Religious people visiting the temples, according to their own economic means, sacrificed divine victims and offered a variety of votives with or without inscription for gratitude after healing or asking to heal.<sup>[1,6,8,16-18]</sup>

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### Health-Giving Anatolian Gods and Inscribed Male Genital Votives Offered to Gods

Several written findings show us that in addition to the 12 big Greek Gods, many gods and goddesses have been worshiped in Anatolia. While a great majority of these religions were influential in a very small geographical region, some cults such as that of the Moon God Meis, “The Highest God” Theos Hypsistos, or Sabazios are known to have spread all over the ancient world. As in the cult of Asclepius, temples belonging to these gods were centers to which local people flocked to find a remedy for their diseases or for social problems.

There were local gods and goddesses that people sought cure from them in Anatolia as well. One of those was the Mother Goodness Phileis whose temple was discovered within the borders of Manisa city in the Lydia region of Western Anatolia.<sup>[18-20]</sup> The Greek text on a marble votive stone (stela), which depicted a male genital organ, belonging to the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century Roman imperial period, was presented to the main goddess Phileis, with the translation following as:

*“His mother offered (this votive) with prayers for the healing of her son Tatianos. O Mother Goddess Phileis, I had this votive made for you”* (Figure 1).

In addition to the organ offerings presented to the goddess Phileis that expressed eyes, arms, and legs, the organ votives pictured female breast and male genitalia indicating that the goddess was a goddess of both the male and female fertility and childbirth.<sup>[20]</sup> The inscriptions to date show that Meter Phileis was a goddess that people were seeking help from her with their health problems.<sup>[20]</sup>

On the other hand, a few votive stones (stela) with Greek inscriptions that were found in Anatolia in the region between Ionia and Lydia are seen to have been offered to Thea (Mother Goddess) Ollie. One of these votive stones is part of a private collection in Izmir, and a Greek inscription and a relief depicting the male genital organs reveals the healing character of this local Mother Goddess.<sup>[21]</sup> In the translation of this article, there is the following expression:

*“Loukianos and Loukiane offered this votive to the Mother Goddess Olline, who hears prayers”* (Figure 2).

The cult of Theos Hypsistos (“Most High God”), another god believed to have healing powers, was spread throughout a vast geographical area encompassing the shores of the Black Sea, the eastern Mediterranean, Anatolia, and Greece between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. and 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The most distinguished feature of the Theos Hypsistos belief was that people were seeking cure in this cult. In most of the offerings presented to gods, there were body parts pictured, hoped to be cured.<sup>[22]</sup> A bronze votive



Figure 1. The marble votive stela offered to the local Anatolian Mother Goddess (Meter) Phileis (Alaçehir/Killik); 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century Roman imperial period, Manisa Archeology Museum, Manisa, Turkey.

providing evidence that this god also healed diseases related to the genital organs dates back to the Roman imperial age and is still being displayed at the Harvard Art Museum. The translation of the Greek writing on this votive is as follows:

*“Hermes offered this votive to Theos Hypsistos.”* (Figure 3).

Another votive stone related to the male genital organs is a limestone altar found in the Bithynia region, and again, it dates back to the Roman imperial age and is a part of the Haluk Perk private collection. Based on what we can understand from the inscription and the genital organ figure on it, the votive was presented to the God Sozon as a gratitude statement by a mother whose son’s disease of the genitals was healed. In the translation of the inscription, there is the following expression:

*“May it go well! Didyme has (presented) (this offering) to the God Sozon as the sign of his appreciation for his son Dios”* (Figure 4).

Sozon, who was a local Anatolian god, usually identified with Zeus, or even more likely with Apollo, and he was more commonly worshiped in Anatolia in the Lycia and Phrygia regions. Sozon who hears and sees people everywhere, was a god saving people from difficult circumstances.<sup>[23]</sup>

In the crowded port cities and the cities with brothels or close to brothels, it was specified that the frequency of urogenital diseases was increasing, particularly the phimosis, due to the increase of venereal diseases.<sup>[1]</sup> Also, in the ancient Greece and Rome, mobile physicians, folk physicians, secular hippocratic doctors, and priest physicians in the temples used various medications (topical or oral) in sexually transmitted diseases and urinary stone diseases. They also tried open surgical interventions in phimosis, and they used urinary catheters made of bronze or bone in urinary difficulties and bladder stones.<sup>[1,24-26]</sup>

A number of the written documents reaching the present day regarding what diseases were healed by priest physicians and



Figure 2. The marble votive stela offered to Olline, who was a local Anatolian Mother Goddess (Thea) (around Manisa-Izmir). Unknown time, Private Collection, Izmir, Turkey.



Figure 3. The bronze genital votive offered to the “Most High God” (Theos Hypsistos). Roman imperial age, Harvard Art Museum, Cambridge, USA.



Figure 4. The marble votive altar presented to Sozon, who was an Anatolian god. Roman imperial age, Private Haluk Perk Museum, Istanbul, Turkey.

what treatment methods were applied in the temples of gods in the Ancient Age are quite limited. In the epigraphic works on inscribed votive stones presented to gods and goddesses, it is expressed that the written texts are generally very short and that only the names of the person who dedicate and the god or goddess.<sup>[27]</sup> Therefore, we can make assumptions up to some reasonable point about the visitors of the temples and the urogenital diseases that they hoped to be cured by the gods. In this case, new information will be acquired from the medical inscriptions and inscribed offerings that were discovered but not translated into today's languages or that are going to be discovered. To understand the medicine of the Ancient Age, the written documents about the ancient diseases and their treatments written by Hippocrates and the later physicians are also becoming increasingly important.

This paper has some limitation. First, it presents only a limited number of inscribed examples because these were the available and taken from the excavations until today. As we mentioned previously, there are probably other inscribed offerings discovered but not translated yet. The other limitation is that some references and sources are very old, and there are no more recent references that could be reveal more about this topic.

In conclusion, on four inscribed offerings depicting male urogenital system, we believe that the person presenting the offering had a urogenital problem. Therefore, these offerings were presented to the god or goddess mentioned to obtain a cure or as an appreciation after the treatment.

Specific information on other urogenital diseases could not be obtained because the penis and testicle anatomies in the genital organ figures on the votive stones had generally a normal form, except for phimotic appearances. Similarly, in the inscriptions, no information was given about the urogenital diseases or treatments the patients requested from gods. In the genital organ figures found on all of these four votive stones, the penises are understood to be of phimotic appearance. It is possible to imagine that this situation developed due to venereal diseases, which were common in the ancient world. However, the fact that the penis and testicles are depicted together in all of these figures bring to mind urinary tract infection, dysuria, difficult urination due to urethral stricture, bladder stones and disorders associated with the testes, such as impotence and infertility as well.

Inscribed or anatomical organ offerings, indicating their prayers with regard to their diseases or recovering from the diseases, are standing in front of us evidencing of the role that religious temples and gods played in the medical treatment in the Ancient Age.

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