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### Superstitions Related to Conception, Pregnancy, Childbirth, Breastfeeding and the Postnatal Period in the Past and Today

Mgr. et Bc. Klára Nádaská<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Institute of European Ethnology, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University

**Abstract:** This paper deals with superstitions related to conception, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and the postnatal period as well as with the question of femininity in addition to motherhood in general from a historical perspective as well as recent times. In terms of ethnology and length of time, this issue has not been coherently dealt with in the central Europe yet.<sup>1</sup> The specialized academic field lacks in-depth processing and comparing of selected superstitions from different time periods while comparing them with contemporary views of respondents.

The selected issue is examined from the period beginning with Sumerian-Akkadian written records (approx. 6000 B.C.). At that time, society did not distinguish between magicians and physicians. The first instances of sympathetic magic can be recorded<sup>2</sup> in superstitions, which then also appear in following periods. An example of the influence of this kind of magic is shown in an excerpt from a legend about the woman Sing. Invocation formula went as following: “*As Gi-Sin, Sin happily gave birth to a girl, also this young woman should give birth.*”<sup>3</sup> Another examined period is that of ancient Egypt and its<sup>4</sup> surviving papyri containing a list of examined superstitions. The influence of sympathetic magic is also evident in the following Egyptian superstition: “*(How) to ensure that a child which does not suck, takes it (breast): Swallow! Horus says. Bite! Says Set. Certainly, it is given to you [...].*”<sup>5</sup> The research continues through the period of ancient Greece and Rome, where physicians and healers were already distinguished. However, even in this period many prejudices and superstitions persisted. From the period of ancient Greece, the views of Empedocles, Parmenides, Hippocrates and Aristotle were chosen for examination. From the Roman period, we chose Pliny the Elder and Soranos of Ephesus. The results from the historical part are compared with recent research, where I surveyed a total of 150 respondents from Central

<sup>1</sup> The idea to examine the way of the transmission of superstitions associated with fertility, pregnancy and childbirth in Europe was only conducted by Frenchman Jacques Gélis in 1984 in his book *L'Arbre e tle Fruit*.

<sup>2</sup> Sympathetic magic, also known as imitative magic, is a type of magic based on imitation or correspondence.

<sup>3</sup> Sibert, Ilse: *Die Fraunem im alten Orient*. Leipzig: edition Leipzig, 1937, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Papyrus of Kahuna, papyrus from Ramesseum, medical papyri found by E. Smith and C. Ebers and Brugsch's papyrus.

<sup>5</sup> Case of Ramesseum III. I. 10-11, p. 125.

Europe<sup>6</sup> about the knowledge and practice of superstitions in their personal lives.<sup>7</sup> Even in recent times it appears the influence of sympathetic magic, for example, in the following superstition: “*if a pregnant woman is cheerful, her child will also have a cheerful personality.*”<sup>8</sup>

The methods used in this research are as follows. For the historical part a close reading method was used and there was careful work with the extant sources. The fieldwork, which continues from 2010 until today, combines classic fieldwork research with Internet research. Fieldwork is conducted through semi-structured interviews with selected respondents in the Czech Republic, Austria and Poland.<sup>9</sup> On the Internet, we examined comments in chats and discussions on selected websites related to the topic.<sup>10</sup>

The research results are surprising. Similarities can be seen between superstitions that are spaced even 4,000 years from each other. Some superstitions of ancient Egypt or Antiquity survived and are unchanged to this day. The link between the ancient superstitions and to recent ones can be both a principle on which they build as well as a kind of magic, such as sympathetic or homeopathic.

This paper is unique due its research topic and because it has been processed in such time span. The issue of superstitions is, from an anthropological point of view, neglected and it is therefore necessary to pay more attention to it.

This article focuses on the research of development, internal structure and collection of preserved superstitions related to the conception, pregnancy, breastfeeding and the postnatal period. It builds on the author’s bachelor thesis,<sup>11</sup> that dealt with contemporary preserved superstitions of this kind in the Czech Republic and the literature that deals with them. The master’s thesis<sup>12</sup> then explored the frequency and similarity of selected superstitions in Central Europe<sup>13</sup> and addressed this issue more deeply from an ethnological and cyberanthropological perspective. In these papers, respondents were asked questions such as: Do you know any superstitions related to conception, pregnancy, breastfeeding or the postnatal period? If so, where do you know it from? Do you believe it?<sup>14</sup> Subsequent doctoral research builds on the previous papers and existing materials as well as develops them further. The main questions of doctoral research are as follows: From what time and place do the surviving superstitions come from? On what basis are the surviving superstitions alike? This article seeks to answer these questions. At this point, it is necessary to set out the period which will be discussed here. The beginning of magical practices, on which the discussed superstitions build on, can be found in ancient Babylon and the Sumerian-Akkadian literature. Thus, this is the period that ranges between 6,000-4,000 years BC. Superstitious practices were further spread by trade with ancient Egypt and from there to ancient Greece

<sup>6</sup> By Central Europe, we mean the following countries: the Czech Republic, Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Poland. Hungary is omitted due to a language barrier.

<sup>7</sup> I asked whether they are familiar with any superstitions related to my topic, from whom they know them or how they know them as well as if they believe in them or consider them to be nonsense.

<sup>8</sup> Anonymous respondent, date of research: 3 June 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Until today, I have interviewed more than 150 respondents. The overwhelming majority of respondents are women.

<sup>10</sup> For example: <https://maminet.cz>, <https://urbia.de>, <https://parents.at>, <https://babyboom.pl>, <https://modrykonik.sk>.

<sup>11</sup> Nádaská, Klára: *Pověry vážící se k průběhu pohlavního styku, těhotenství, porodu, šestinedělí a kojení v obcích Lechovice a Božice*. Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University, Department of European Ethnology. Supervisor: PhDr. Roman Doušek, Ph.D., Brno, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Nádaská, Klára: *Zmapování a komparace pověr souvisejících s početím, těhotenstvím a šestinedělím ve vybraných diskusních fórech. Case study of material from five countries*. Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University, Department of European Ethnology. Supervisor: Mgr. et Mgr. Klára Brožovičová, Ph.D., Brno, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> By Central Europe we understand the following countries: Germany, the Czech Republic, Austria, Slovakia and Poland. Hungary, which is also understood as a part of Central Europe, is omitted due to language barriers.

<sup>14</sup> Answers to these questions and the overall results of the research are presented in my previous work.

and Rome. The time period which is examined, concerning the emergence and transmission of superstitions, therefore includes the period from Babylon to the demise of the Roman Empire, which is approx. 6,500 years. The following periods such as the Middle Ages, the influence of Christianity, the Enlightenment and the Modern Age will not be covered here as the author has not finished processing the research.

The literature this article works with, begins with clay tablets, on which cuneiform magic formulas and commandments were recorded.<sup>15</sup> It is the surviving Sumerian-Akkadian literature, whose highlight is a library of the Neo-Assyrian King Assurbanipal. The article explores a threefold division of physicians, the relationship with the gods of fertility and a quotation of superstitions as found in literature. Regarding Egyptian sources, this article uses preserved papyri. For this research, *Kahun Papyri* (the most well-known surviving papyrus) was used, which was discovered by Flinders Petrie in Lahun (the Pyramid city), which is erroneously called Kahun. Its origin dates back to the years between 2200-1950 BC and falls into the period of the Middle Kingdom, perhaps to the reign of Amenemhet III. The papyrus contains information about gynecology and obstetrics. Another source of superstitions examined is from *Ramesseum Papyri* found by the British archaeologist James Edward Quibell within the proximity of the Temple of Ramses II. In the shaft, a total of seventeen papyri were found that probably belonged to a magician or a healer, since the medical procedures recorded have magical content and are related to a mother and a child which is already born. The third papyrus this article uses is the so-called *Carlberg VIII*. It is one of the medical papyri found by Edwin Smith and Carlsberg Ebers that dates back to the period between 1700-1600 BC. It mentions pregnancy as to its duration and childbirth. The fourth and final papyrus mentioned in this article is *the Berlin papyrus* which is sometimes also referred to as the *Brugsch Papyrus* as it was studied and deciphered by Brugsch Heinrich. Translations of these papyri into English can be found on the website of the London Museum<sup>16</sup> or in the Czech publication *Lékařství starých Egyptanů I*.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding Ancient Greek literature, this article mentions considerations and ideas derived from the teachings of Empedocles, of which only doxographic fragments have survived and<sup>18</sup> deal with the overall creation as well as composition of life out of the individual elements. Empedocles's theory on the origin of the first man and woman and their subsequent reproduction is discussed by Herman De Ley in the study *Empedocle's Sexual Theory*.<sup>19</sup> Another Greek philosopher, Parmenides, builds on Empedocles's teaching and in his doxographic fragments (testimonia) we find similar information with an emphasis on the differentiation of heat and cold as well as the right and left sides in the process of the creation of a man. Hippocrates is perhaps the most well-known person in medicine from ancient Greece who is famous for his *Hippocratic Corpus* and whose contents were analyzed and explained by Hynek Bartoš and Sylva Fisherová in their book *Hippocrates. Vybrané spisy I*.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, this article is inspired by the academic work of Jaroslav Daneš *Corpus Hippocraticum a řecká filozofie*. Two Roman philosophers are also mentioned. Firstly, Pliny Secundus who is famous for his *Naturalis Historia*,<sup>21</sup> which describes climate, diet, animals, plants as well as human health, has several recipes that are mentioned (Ibrahim, Manaf, and Aizuddin, 2015; Zainuddin, Suhadi, Rais, Maidin, and Palutturi, 2015). Another scholar is Soranus of Ephesus, who is known for his *Gynaikeia* (Gynecology),<sup>22</sup> which discusses the existing knowledge

<sup>15</sup> Doležal, Antonín; Kuželka, Vítězslav; Zvěřina, Jaroslav: *Evropa – kolébka vědeckého porodnictví*. Praha: Galén, 2009, p.12.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/med/birthpapyrus.html>

<sup>17</sup> Strouhal, Eugen; Vachala, Břetislav; Vymazalová, Hana: *Lékařství starých Egyptanů I. Staroegyptská chirurgie. Péče o ženu a dítě*. Academia, Praha, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Vitek, Tomáš: *Empedoklés I. Studie*. Praha: Herman & synové, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> De Ley, Herman: *Empedocles's sexual Theory: A Note on Fragment B 63*. L'antiquité classique/ Année 1987/ Volume 47, Numéro 1.

<sup>20</sup> Bartoš, Hynek; Fischerová, Sylva a kol.: *Hippokratés. Vybrané spisy I*. Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Němeček, František: *Plinius Starší kapitoly o přírodě*. Svoboda: Praha, 1974.

<sup>22</sup> Owsei, Temkin: *Soranu's Gynecology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1902.

of that time related to gynecology, conception, pregnancy and childbirth. It also contains the first characteristics of what exactly is a midwife.

Research methods are chosen according to the nature of the investigated materials and according to the criteria of field research. In the history part, which works with well-preserved literary fragments, the method of close reading is used. The part dealing with the contemporary transmission of superstitions uses a combination of two methods. The first method is a semi-structured interview, which was used during interviews with respondents from the Czech Republic, Austria and Poland. This article includes quotes from interviews, which were conducted between 2010-2015. The second method is cyber anthropological. It is based on the growing need of American anthropologists in the late 20th century to scientifically reflect evolving information and communication technologies. In the case of this article, quotations are used from conversations that took place in discussion forums on selected websites related to superstitions.

The discoveries that have been made by comparing material from Babylon, Egypt, Greece and Rome with the present superstitions are described in this section of the article. First, it is advisable to start with legends preserved from the period of the ancient Sumerians, which is described as follows:

*“It is a legend about when Gi-Sin should give a birth, but she could not, and so the moon god Sin brought other sky deities - birth water and oil, which he then smeared on the girl, and she gave birth, doing exactly what midwives do to help pregnant women. Invocation formula read as follows: As Gi-Sin, Sin happily gave birth to a girl, so this young woman should give birth.”<sup>23</sup>*

From the quotation, it is clear that the content of the legend is associated with the use of sympathetic magic, particularly with its subtype called homeopathic magic. Homeopathic magic assumes, that two different things can inform each other on the basis of certain similarities. In the quote, similarities can be found between the mythical effortless childbirth of Gi-Sin and the labor of a specific woman. In this case, we can also observe the unification of deities and the specific laboring woman in one person, which was a typical belief of ancient Sumerians. Sumerians mated during fertility festivals in temples as an incarnation of the gods of Ishtar and Tammuz or Sarpanit and Marduk. By doing so, they showed the gods what is expected of them. Superstitions from which the content is based on the principle of homeopathic magic or on the identification with a particular deity, can be found even in ancient Egypt. The following example comes from a papyrus from Kahun:

*“Another instance. You should have games sit on earth smeared with DREGS of sweet beer, put fruit, [dates...]. [...] ejects, she will give birth and for every ejection Which comes from games of mouth, each loop is one birth (?) [...]. [If she] does not [eject] though, she will never give birth.”<sup>24</sup>*

Vomiting, is in this case, is compared to child birth using the principle of homeopathic magic. In this superstition, we can find one more principle. The ancient Egyptians believed that the digestive tube connected the genitals through the stomach and uterus. The fact, that a woman should sit on the dregs of beer, fruit and dates may correspond with such a belief on the interconnectedness of the tubes and thus it was believed to induce vomiting. With this belief the next superstition corresponds: *“Place an onion in a woman’s vagina. If the odor is present in her mouth the next day, then she is able to become pregnant.”<sup>25</sup>* The Ramesseum Papyrus contains superstitions, in which a pregnant woman or child is identified with a deity that should protect them. For example: *“(How) to ensure that a child which does not suck, takes it (breast): Swallow! Horus says. Bite!*

<sup>23</sup> Sibert, Ilse: *Die Fraunem im alten Orient*. Leipzig: edition Leipzig, 1937, p. 32.

<sup>24</sup> Column 3, 15-17. Quoted from: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/med/birthpapyrus.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, James: *Women in the ancient World. The status, role and daily life of women in the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Rome, Athens, Israel and Babylonia*. Revised July 2010. Quoted from: <http://www.womenintheancientworld.com/>.

*Says Set. Certainly, it is given to you [...].*<sup>26</sup> This example shows that a woman in labor is likened to the goddess Set and a child to the god Horus, which is a typical belief of the ancient Egyptians. The last example in this article can be found on Carlsberg papyrus VIII and on the Berlin papyrus and reads as follows: “*The sex of an unborn child was predicted using wheat and barley. The mother-to-be would urinate over the seeds of both barley and wheat. If the barley sprouted, then the woman was carrying a boy and if the wheat sprouted she was carrying a girl.*”<sup>27</sup> This superstition is interesting for its genesis. In 1933, a German physician called Julius Manger performed a series of experiments, during which he proved that the urine of a pregnant woman actually promotes the increased growth of just one of the cereals.<sup>28</sup> But scientists agree on the fact that for the Egyptians, such determination of sex was a magical act, that was not based on medical knowledge. The magical act worked on the principle of analogy (sympathetic magic), where the male gender was identified with barley and the female gender with wheat. This method of diagnosis of gender persisted and was used for example in Germany in the 18th century. However, due to grammatical reasons, wheat (der Weizen) was identified with a boy and barley (die Gerste) with a girl.

Antiquity enriched the theories of the origin of the human by philosophical debates of scholars and a stricter distinction between physicians and magicians. Pregnant women and children have ceased to be identified with deities and a mediator (priestess) was chosen instead, who advocated for fertility and protection during childbirth. One of the first philosophers who was interested in this subject was Empedocles. Regarding the creation of men and women, Empedocles emphasized the influence of an ambient climate. In his surviving fragment, which is known as B 63, he indicates that the first women were cold and wet and were also born in the north. Men were defined by heat as well as drought and were born in the south and east.<sup>29</sup> He also held the view that each sex has its own seed<sup>30</sup> and developed his theory about the evolution of gender: “[...] *males are born if [semen] came into the warm womb, while the females when they came into the cold womb.*”<sup>31</sup> This theory was further developed by Parmenides, who claimed that male offspring are formed in the right testicle and female on the left.<sup>32</sup> The greatest Greek scholar in the field of medicine, Hippocrates, famous for “his”<sup>33</sup> *Hippocratic Corpus* and from which citations are drawn related to the topic. The first example corresponds with the ideas of the ancient Egyptians about the interconnected tubes and gives advice on how to determine whether a woman is fertile: “*wrapped in a cloak, and lighted incense is placed beneath her. If it is possible to detect the smell of incense from her mouth, she is fertile, a woman should be hollow inside.*”<sup>34</sup> The ancient philosophers developed the Egyptian idea of connected tubes and argued that the uterus is a wandering unanchored organ located in the abdomen and causes hysteria. The Roman philosopher and warrior Pliny Secundus in his *Naturalis Historia* mentions disgust with quacks and sorcerers who offered ointments that had no effect and highlighted the knowledge acquired from

<sup>26</sup> Strouhal, Eugen; Vachala, Břetislav; Vymazalová, Hana: *Lékařství starých Egyptanů I. Staroegyptská chirurgie. Péče o ženu a dítě.* Academia, Praha, 2010, Případ Ramesseum III. line 10-11, p. 125.

<sup>27</sup> *Ancient Egyptian Test.* Quoted from: <http://www.chinesegenderchart.info/101-gender-predictors.php/3>.

<sup>28</sup> Manger, Julius: *Untersuchungen zum Problem der Geschlechtsdiagnose aus Schwangerenarn.* In: *Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift*, 59 (23), Stuttgart: Georg Thieme Verlag, 1933, p. 885-888. Available at: <https://www.thieme-connect.de/DOI/DOI?10.1055/s-0028-1131712>.

<sup>29</sup> De Ley, Herman: *Empedocles' Sexual Theory: A Note on Fragment B 63.* *L'antiquité classique/ Année 1987/ Volume 47, Numéro 1/*, p. 156.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 237.

<sup>31</sup> Haydruck, M.: *Commentaria in Aristotelis De anima.* Berlin, 1882, 764 and 3.

<sup>32</sup> Parmenides: *Testimonia* DK 28 A, A 53/1. Available at: <http://www.fysis.cz/presokratici/parmenides/acz.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> Hippocratic Corpus is a set of surviving medical texts written in Ionian dialect of Greek. It's a diverse mix of writings, whose single character is difficult, if not impossible, to define. The total corpus of texts is classified into 62 individual files according to the theme.

<sup>34</sup> Hippokrates, *Aforisms* 5.59.

medicine. With this corresponds his refusal of a magical effect, which amphisbaena should have<sup>35</sup> for pregnant women, who kept it in box or wore it around their neck. Soranos of Ephesus builds on Pliny's teachings, especially in his *Gynaikēia*. He publicly advocates against superstitions and encourages women not to believe everything that is said but he also supports theories such as: "if the fetus is male, the gravida will feel the movement to be more acute and vehement; if referring to: it is female, the movements will be both slower and more sluggish, while the gravida too moves less with ease and has a stronger inclination to vomiting."<sup>36</sup> He also refers to a superstition that comes from the ancient doctrine of the supremacy of man and which is even told today: "good color in women with male child results from the exercise caused by the movement of the fetus; while the bad color in women with a female child is due to the inactivity of the fetus."<sup>37</sup>

If we compare the surviving superstitions with recent material obtained through fieldwork or from internet forum research, we find that the results can be divided into three groups. The first group includes superstitions that survived unchanged to this day. The first is the superstition that comes from Egypt and is still told even today: "Does anybody have experience with watering cereals with urine? Wheat and barley are sprinkled, when wheat sprouts first, it's a boy, when barley, a girl ;-). I have some seedlings from Easter left :-)."<sup>38</sup> A second example is the superstition about color (in the face) of pregnant women that dates back to Soranus of Ephesus. Its contemporary version is as follows: "if it is a girl, it takes beauty from the woman, she is pale in the face, if it's a boy, the woman is beautiful and has pretty pink cheeks."<sup>39</sup> The first group also includes superstitions associated with the principles of sympathetic magic, which are still relevant. For example: "if a woman drinks a lot of coffee, she will give birth to a black baby."<sup>40</sup> The second group includes superstitions that are still told in some modified form. For example, the comparison of the ancient doctrine of the right and left side with the following superstition: "if the belly leans to the right, it will be a boy, if to the left, it will be a girl."<sup>41</sup> Empedocles's philosophical theories about the birth of women in the north to the men who are from the south and east are still told as superstitions. However, in a reversed sense: "for it to be a girl, a woman must have a head pointing to the north during lovemaking, for a boy to the south."<sup>42</sup> Research has also recorded many superstitions from Egypt, ancient Greece and Rome, which disappeared in Central Europe.<sup>43</sup> These include the identification with a certain deity during childbirth, a belief of the digestive tube connecting the uterus with the genital organs as well as the idea of a wandering uterus.

In this part, the paper will try to answer the questions posed above. The first question is: from what time and place the surviving superstitions come from? The surviving superstition about barley and wheat comes from Egypt and has been told approx. 3,200 years.<sup>44</sup> The superstition about the color of pregnant women first appeared

<sup>35</sup> Amphisbaena is according to Greek mythology mythical creature of serpentine appearance, which originated from drops Medusa's blood when Perseus travelled the Libyan Desert with her head. This creature has a snakelike body and two heads at its end. In the popular medicine, they are attributed magical and medicinal properties to him. The creature most resembles Amphisbaena, a member of the class Reptilia, which was kept by the Greeks in their homes.

<sup>36</sup> Temkin, Owsei: *Soranu's Gynecology*. Quoted from: <https://books.google.cz/books?id=YsKWfh31gxwC&lpg=PR1&hl=cs&pg=PA45#v=onepage&q=sex%20of%20child&f=false>, p. 45.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

<sup>38</sup> Anonymous user #298298 Quoted from: <https://www.womenzone.cz/poradna/otazky/Mate-zkusenost-s-urcenim-pohlaviditete-na-zaklade-kropeni-jecmene-a-psenice-moci-160477>. Accessed on July 15, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Reply by respondent from Poland, 32 years. Date of research: May 12, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Reply by respondent from the Czech Republic, 44 years. Date of research: May 10, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Reply by respondent from the Czech Republic, 37 years. Date of research: July 5, 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Reply by respondents from Austria, 46 years. Date of research: July 9, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Field nor online research has not recorded any recent version of these superstitions.

<sup>44</sup> The style of writing in Brugsch Papyrus is that of the 19th dynasty, and it is dated between 1350 and 1200 BC.

from Soranus of Ephesus and is about 1,900 years old.<sup>45</sup> The superstitions about the right and left as well as the north and south, which have survived though are partly modified, have been derived from the Antiquity. They are probably based on the teachings of Parmenides and Empedocles and they are roughly 2,500 years old.<sup>46</sup> The second question is: on what basis were the surviving superstitions similar? Similarity can be seen in the internal structure of superstitions statements that relate to the principles of sympathetic or homeopathic magic and were already recorded by the ancient Sumerians. Therefore, they have existed for around 5,000 or 4,000 years.<sup>47</sup> In addition to these questions, the research recorded and described the development of other superstitions that were not preserved to this day. The question arises, at what time and in what circumstances these superstitions disappeared. Further research is recommended on the development of superstitions in the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment and modern times. It would also be also interesting to examine the whole topic from a medical perspective.

This article examined superstitions related to conception, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and the postnatal period in ancient Sumer, ancient Egypt, ancient Greece and Rome. The results of historical research were compared with the results of recent field research and based on comparison, similarities between the superstitions and the date of their creation were determined. Additionally, it enumerated examples of superstitions that have already disappeared but undoubtedly influenced the evolving opinions of scholars through the ages.

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<sup>45</sup> Soranos of Ephesus wrote his Gynaecology in 138 AD.

<sup>46</sup> Empedocles lived from 492-432 BC.

<sup>47</sup> Sumerian-Akkadian literature dates from the formation of ancient Sumerians (about 4000 BC) and the Akkadian empire (2334-2154 BC).

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