

SHORT
COMMUNICATION

Aretaeus of Cappadocia, and his
Magnificent Treatise on Satyriasis



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Abstract

Men's hypersexuality was called in ancient Greece "satyriasis" (Greek: Σατυρίαση). Satyrs, were depicted in ancient Greek mythology as half men and half goats, given to lecherous revelry in their dedication towards the exaggerated appetites, being lower class deities who accompanied Dionysus. Aretaeus of Cappadocia, gave a masterful description of the disease, supporting the Hippocratic doctrine of the four humours, and considering the excess of the blood inside the big arteries of the kidneys as the main pathological cause of the penile erection. He had proposed various remedies, and considered that Satyriasis was an acute fatal disease that could kill the sufferer within seven days.

Key words: Satyrs, satyriasis, penile erection, ancient Greece, Aretaeus

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Introduction

Ancient Greek medico philosophers had a great interest towards the high sexual desire. Female hypersexuality was named “nymphomania”, or madness of the womb. The term “nymphomania” (Greek: νυμφομανία), was constructed by the appellation “Nymphes”, low class female divinities, followers of the ancient Greek god Dionysus and the term “mania”. The name “satyriasis” (Greek: Σατυρίαση) was appointed for the male hypersexuality. The Satyrs, were actually brothers of the hillbilly Nymphes, humble deities in the ancient Greek province. Satyrs were mythical creatures, half human, half animal, with hairy body, bifurcated legs, pointed ears and an oblate nose, having in excess the hedonistic and lustful desire of the goat. Cowards, lazy, drunkards and on the other hand lascivious in nature. Satyrs were most probably born in the imagination of the shepherds in the ancient Greek highlands [Figure 1]. Their constant wishfulness for sex, urged the ancient Greeks to name the pathological entity of the permanent erection of the male penis, after them.¹⁻³

- 1- Agmo, 2007: 430-432.
- 2- Decharme, 1886: 445.
- 3- Richepin, 1921: 30.



Figure 1. Satyrs copulating in a mountain scenery, artist unknown, 18th century erotic gravure.

Aretaeus, native of Cappadocia (Greek: Αρεταίος ο Καππαδόκης), lived in the city of Alexandria, between the end of the 1st and the beginning of the 3rd century AD, practicing medicine as a representative of the Eclectic philosophical School (Greek: Εκλεκτική Σχολή). He is considered to be the second most prolific medical writer after Hippocrates



(ca 460-370 BC). He wrote his manuscripts in Ionian dialect, the dialect that had been used by Hippocrates himself, in such a way that no medical author of antiquity surpasses him in his vivid portrayal of various diseases. He was the author that gave us the outstanding description of satyriasis in ancient Greek world. Although he had followed the Hippocratic doctrine of the four humours (yellow bile, black bile, phlegm and blood) and the spirit (Greek: πνεύμα≈the vital spirit), he devoted more attention towards anatomy and physiology than most ancient physicians.⁴⁻⁷

Our study records Aretaeus' views on the subject of satyriasis, in an effort to capture the prevailing perspective of the era and unveil the proposed remedies for the sufferers.

Aretaeus, on Satyriasis

Aretaeus inside his treatises “De causis et signis diuturnorum morborum”, and “De curatione acutorum morborum”, he had described satyriasis, as a disease, recorded its symptoms, and proposed its treatment. He had considered that apart the elderly, it could appear in adolescents too. According to his point of view, satyriasis could appear to all those who by nature had increased urges towards sexual hedonism. In total agreement with modern scholars, he had also certified that, “Satyrs, deities dedicated to Dionysus, portrayed under an erection status in paintings and statues as a symbol of their divinity [Figure 2]. This could also be a condition in which the patient's genital organs are erected (Greek: στύση), called satyriasis due to its similarity to the shape of the god. A disease characterized by the profuse momentum for sexual intercourse, but with no subsidence due to any encounter, or loosen of the erection even after many repeated coital”.⁸

Aretaeus stated satyriasis' pathological cause and described its symptomatology. The excess of blood around genitalia, derived from the kidneys' arteries, could trigger the inflammation, by causing high temperature, “inflammation of the genital's nerves causes the penile erection, accompanied with a strong sexual desire and discomfort during intercourse. At the beginning the patients suffer confusion in their judgment, not feeling shame for their condition during public demonstration, due to the irrepressible tendency to intercourse, that makes them shameless. Spasmodic tensions could appear, which never alleviate and at the end the diseased recuperate and their judgement returns.⁹ Most sufferers die during the seventh day”.¹⁰

For satyriasis to be cured, Aretaeus proposed that patients

- 4- Maggina, 1890: 493-498.
- 5- Kouzis, 1950: 7.
- 6- Tsoucalas et al, 2012: 313-315.
- 7- Tsoucalas et al, 2016: 427-428.
- 8- Aretaeus, 1958a: 56.
- 9- Aretaeus 1958b: 406-410.
- 10- Aretaeus, 1958a: 56.





- 11- Ibid.
- 12- Aretaeus 1958b: 406-410.
- 13- Tsoukalas, 2004: 903-912.

Figure 2. Statue of Silenus (a satyr), depicting a penile erection, manufactured by a Corinthian workshop, dated between 540-530 BC, National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece.

should fell asleep for long time periods.¹¹ Then he had recommended the whole body to be cleaned and for slightly medication to be administered. In his opinion the medicine that could cover both these needs was the “holy herb” (Greek: ιερά βοτάνη),¹² most probably “Hyoscyamus auveus” that contains scopolamine, a known electuary at that epoch.¹³ To reduce the internal heat caused by the blood’s excess, he had proposed for the region of the pubis and genitals to be covered with raw wool soaked in rose oil and wine, or sponges to wet the area. He had also practised flushes, applied poultices, made liniments and enemas with mallow decoction (malva), oil and honey and applied cupping and leeches, which were considered very good to absorb blood from inside the human organism. For the poultices he had used a mixture of bread with plantain herb juice (plantain, plantago), night-



shade (stinkweed, solanum), dandelion (seris), poppy leaves (papaver), hemlock (herba conii maculati), water, or wine, or vinegar, mandrake (mandragora) and acacia (acacia arabica).¹⁴ His main purpose was that this therapeutic approach could cause the sedation of the patient and the cooling of his body. On the other hand, if the disease turned into a chronic illness, he had proposed heating pharmaceuticals, such as oil from grape or “sikyonio oil” (cucumber), and drinkable castor oil with mead (Greek: υδρόμελι).^{15, 16}

Aretaeus recommended a specific dietetic regime to confront with satyriasis, “few cereals and mostly vegetables, mallow (malva), notchweeds, lettuce, baked pumpkin (cucurbita lagenaria) and ripe melon. Meat and wine should be avoided. Wine must be given sparingly due to his properties of causing sperm secretion and stirring up the pleasures.”¹⁷

Epilogue

Satyriasis, presented in antiquity as a hyperphilia for multiple repetition of an erotosexual practise with many partners as an essential prerequisite to a man’s own orgasm. It had been categorised by Aretaeus of Cappadocia to the acute diseases of the urinary tract, as blood in excess inside the large arteries of the kidneys was the cause of the penile erection.¹⁸ Satyriasis’ delineation inside Aretaeus treatises astonishing still remains in valid, demonstrating the pioneering though and perception of the ancient Greek medical scholars.

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- 14- Aretaeus 1958b: 406-409.
15- Ibid.
16- Tsoukalas, 2004: 903-912.
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