

Fertility Control in Ancient Rome.

On 20 February, 17 Exeter U3a members enjoyed a talk by Rebecca Flemming, Professor of Ancient Science, Medicine and Technology about family life in the Roman Empire. Setting the social context, Prof. Flemming told us that while men were in overall charge in the household, women had equal rights of inheritance and if they felt unfairly treated, could take their siblings to Court! Women were respected for being good wives and mothers and this was reflected on their tombs. They needed their husband's permission to use birth control or attempt an abortion. Statues of buxom women carrying several babies in their arms were everywhere; the only women not expected to have children were prostitutes and slaves.

Achieving a healthy family gave a wife prestige and status but was very challenging; despite the Romans' use of bathing and drainage, and the medical knowledge of the day, infant mortality was common as there was no concept of infection.

Even so, in the medical texts, much of the knowledge around healthy children needing healthy mothers that we see as fundamental today was already known. For example it was recognised that very early pregnancy was dangerous, so the usual age for marriage was the late teens. Sadly the elite preferred their wives to be young and fresh, with inevitable consequences. A sarcophagus records the tragic words of a woman of 27. 'I was married for 16 years (i.e. at age 11) and had six children, only one of whom survives.'

Doctors gave advice on achieving and maintaining pregnancy: Soranus, a physician practising in Rome in the 1st/2nd centuries AD, wrote in *Gynaecology*, 'the best time for fruitful intercourse is when menstruation is abating...and when the body is neither too empty, or too full and heavy from drunkenness and indigestion. When the body has been rubbed down and a little food has been eaten and when a pleasant state exists in every respect.'

There was recognition that infertility could stem from a man or a woman. Various herbal remedies were available and the use of votives – offerings to the gods – was common. A votive was a clay model made in the shape of a body part, even a uterus - the maker would have used an animal's as a template. Folding patterns made in the clay reflected wonderment at how the womb expands and contracts. 'Swaddled votives' – models of tightly wrapped babies, perhaps representing longed-for pregnancies – have also been found.

Once a pregnancy occurred Soranus speaks of the need to 'protect the entering seed' in the first trimester, the treatment of pica (cravings) and sickness in the second, and 'passive exercise' and careful food intake, in the third. Dioscorides, an expert in herbal medicine practising in the 1st Century AD, prescribed clay pessaries (which may have had anti-microbial properties) to prevent miscarriages. Unusual positions of the foetus causing birth problems were known to midwives, who tried to assist. Surgery was very rare - Julius Caesar was not born 'by Caesarian,' these operations came much later – and carried out without anaesthetic.

The most obvious means of family planning was abstention by the wife – men were free to use prostitutes and have affairs. There were attempts at withdrawal methods and having intercourse at other times in the month than that advised by Soranus. It was noted that breastfeeding can delay a future pregnancy but although it was encouraged as its benefits were known, an elite woman would probably use a wet nurse instead. (Feeding bottles have been found; trace substances inside are still being researched but may include goat's milk).

Abortion, through herbs and balms – the use of sharp implements was supposed to be avoided - was carried out although Soranus said it should not be used 'due to adultery or consideration for youthful beauty' but only when there was risk of danger from a small uterus or one with 'knobbly swellings.'

For parents successfully raising children, limiting their number, to give them a better life and a larger inheritance, was a popular concept. Adoption and fostering to help large families economically and benefit the infertile was not uncommon, on the understanding that the child would eventually be reconciled with the birth family. Another, more sinister way to deal with unwanted babies was 'exposure.' Leaving an unwanted newborn outside to die had been an accepted practice in many cultures for hundreds of years. However in Roman times this was becoming controversial with thinkers such as the 1st Century Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus declaring it 'wickedness.' (It eventually died out due to the spread of Christianity). Romans were more likely to leave unwanted infants in a public place like the market, to be collected by a slave owner who would hand them to a wet nurse and then bring them up to be slaves.

Rebecca's talk was a fascinating insight into the subject of reproductive practices in ancient Roman society. Family matters were of great importance, particularly with regard to the the position and rights of women, encouraged to produce and nurture a healthy population. Historically, as now, parents wanted their children to have a successful future within a well-ordered community, and some of the issues which arose then, still do so, and will continue to be the subject of debate.

Loran Waite March 2024