PENILE REPRESENTATIONS IN ANCIENT GREEK ART

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Summary.- OBJECTIVES: The presentation of the cult of phallus in ancient Greece and the artistic appearance of the phenomenon on vase figures and statues, as indicative of the significant role of the male genitalia in all fertility ceremonies. METHODS: The examination of a great number of penile representations from the ancient Greek pottery and sculpture and the review of the ancient theater plays (satiric dramas and comedies). RESULTS: Phallus in artistic representation is connected either with gods of fertility, such as the goat-footed and horned Pan or the ugly dwarf Priapus or the semi-animal nailed figures Satyrs, devotees of the god Dionysus accompanying him in all ritual orgiastic celebrations. Phallus also symbolizes good luck, health and sexuality: people bear or wear artificial phalli exactly like the actors as part of their costume or carry huge penises during the festive ritual processions. On the contrary, the Olympic gods or the ordinary mortals are not ithyphallic; the ideal type of male beauty epitomized in classical sculpture, normally depicts genitals of average or less than average size. It is noteworthy that many of these images belong to athletes during or immediately after hard exercise with the penis shrunk. The normal size genitalia may have been simply a convention to distinguish normal people from the gods of sexuality and fertility, protectors of the reproductive process of Nature. CONCLUSIONS: The representation of the oversize and erected genitalia on vase figures or statues of ancient Greek art is related to fertility gods such as Priapus, Pan and Satyrs and there is strong evidence that imagination and legend were replacing the scientific achievements in the field of erectile function for many centuries.

Keywords: Ancient greece. Ithyphalism. Rituals.

Resumen.- OBJETIVO: La presentación del culto del falo en la Grecia antigua y la aparición artística del fenómeno en figuras de ánforas y estatuas, como indicativo del papel significativo de los genitales masculinos en todas las ceremonias de fertilidad.

MÉTODOS: La examinación de un gran número de representaciones fálicas en la cerámica y escultura griega antigua y la revisión de las antiguas obras teatrales (dramas satíricos y tragedias).

RESULTADOS: El falo en las representaciones artísticas está conectado a los dioses de fertilidad, como Pan, el
dios con pies de chivo y cuernos, o el enano feo Priapo, a los Sátiros, figuras con uñas parecidas a las de los animales, devotos del dios Dioniso que lo acompañan en todas las celebraciones rituales orgiásticas. El falo también simboliza la buena suerte, la salud y la sexualidad; la gente se pone falos artificiales exactamente como los actores, como parte de sus trajes, o lleva penes enormes durante las procesiones rituales festivas. Al contrario, los dioses del Olimpo o los mortales comunes no están representados como ifálicos; el tipo ideal de la belleza masculina resumida en la escultura clásica, normalmente representa genitales de tamaño mediano o aún más pequeño. Es notable que muchas de estas imágenes pertenecen a atletas durante o inmediatamente después de ejercicios duros con el pene reducido. Quizás los genitales de tamaño regular hayan sido sencillamente una convención para distinguir entre la gente común y los dioses de sexualidad y fertilidad, protectores del proceso reproductivo de la Naturaleza.

CONCLUSIONES: la representación de genitales de gran tamaño o en erección en figuras de ánforas y estatuas en el arte griego antiguo está relacionada con dioses de fertilidad como Priapo, Pan y los Sátiros, y existe una gran evidencia de que la imaginación y la leyenda estaban sustituyendo los logros científicos conseguidos durante muchos siglos en el campo de la función eréctil.

**Palabras clave:** Grecia Antigua. Itifalismo. Rituales.

**INTRODUCTION**

Ancient Greek pottery and sculpture demonstrates genitals of several sizes depending much on the identity of the depicted person. Phallus in artistic representation is connected much with gods of fertility, such as the goat-footed god of forests Pan and the dwarfish god Priapus (1). They both are imaged with supersized genitalia and usually ifálico, because the phallus is considered as symbol of abundance. In several agricultural ceremonies to honor them, people bear or wear artificial phalli, for good luck and wealth and healthy animals (2).

On the other hand, the cult of the god Dionysus combines orgiastic rituals with Maenads and Nymphs and wine culture accompanied by the ifálico goat-footed and nailed figures with sexual super-activity, called Satyrs and Sileni (3).

Phallic worship centered on all these gods: Pan, Priapus, and the Dionysian cult (4). The representation of a supernatural phallus remained a permanent feature in all the fertility festive manifestations. Furthermore, the exaggerated size of an erected male organ was strongly believed to bring virility, fertility and good luck, as a symbol of the regenerating power of Nature (5). In urban centers, like ancient Athens, the worship of the god Hermes was expressed with columns at the main streets bearing the god’s head on the top and an ifálico on the base (6).

The artistic evidence implies that over-large genitals were considered aesthetically unpleasing by the Greeks and Romans. The ideal type of male beauty, epitomized in classical sculpture, normally depicts genitals of somewhat less than average size. Consequently, the exaggerated genitals of Priapus made him seem ugly and grotesque figure, though benevolent. The small penises shown on ordinary mortals may have been no more than a convention, to distinguish them from fertility figures, such as Pan, Satyrs and Priapus (7). It also had been pointed out that many of these images belong to athletes during or immediately after hard exercise with the penis shrunk and the testicles hoist high.

**Fertility deities in ancient greek religion**

The god Pan belongs to the twilight world of Satyrs, Fauns, Sileni, in earlier stages of human evolution, the semi-animal state and he probably pre-existed of the god Hermes, although considered as his father (8). He is imaged horned, goat-legged and nailed, wreathed with vine and ivy leaves, ifálico and usually accompanied by forest spirits and sacred animals, also ifálico, such as he-goats and donkeys (9).

The god Priapus, son of beautiful parents (Hermes or Adonis and Aphrodite) is, on the contrary, represented as an ugly, dwarfish figure, bearded and rather old, wreathed with leaves of green plants, as he is the protector of gardens, vineyards, fruit plants, flocks, fishes and all the creatures connected with the regenerating activity of Nature in the plant and animal kingdom. The fertility of plants, beasts and people has never been an issue, since it could not be taken for granted or brought under human control by material means. He is always depicted ifálico, sometimes on columns at the crossroads, with bust and erect phallus, like the Herms, and his name is the origin of the medical term “priapism” (10,11) (Figure 1).

The Phallic Statues of the god Hermes, called Herms (Hermai in Greek) were common in ancient Greek cities protecting the area and used to mark
roads and boundaries. In Athens, they were placed outside houses for good luck. In the 6th century, Hipparchus, the son of Peisistratus, replaced the wayside marker piles of stones that marked the midway point between each village and the central agora of Athens with a rectangular pillar of stone or bronze topped by a bust of Hermes usually with a beard; an erect phallus rose from the base. In the more primitive Herms, the standing stone was simply a phallus shaped one (Figure 2). In 415 BC, when the Athenian fleet was about to set sail for Syracuse (Sicily) during the Peloponnesian War, all of the Athenian Herms were mutilated (12). The citizens at the time believed it was the work of saboteurs either from Syracuse or from the anti-war faction within Athens itself. The Socrates’ beloved student Alcibiades was suspected to be involved and the condemnation of the great philosopher some years later (399 BC) must have a certain correlation with the vandalism of the sacred symbols (13).

The statues and paintings of Hermes as a whole did not share the ithyphallic image. As he was the god of boundaries and exchange, there is no scholarly consensus on this depiction and it would be speculation to consider Hermes a type of fertility god. The phallic organ of the god survived in his offspring: his two sons, Pan and Priapus (14).

Dionysus was worshiped with orgiastic ceremonies, indicative of his Thracian-Phrygian origin and with rural festivals honoring him as the god of wine. The two forms of the same worship got mixed and the new Dionysian cult got born. The element of ecstasy and mysticism of the ritual orgies was embodied in the previous rural character of the celebrations and several annual festivals were established in the city of Athens: Lenaia, Small Dionysia, Great Dionysia, Rural Dionysia. In all these manifestations the devotees were strolling holding phalluses in front of them (15). A scene of Dionysian celebration is given in the comedy of Aristophanes “The Acharnians” (425 BC), where the main hero, Dikaiopolis is addressing to his servant Xanthias: Xanthias, hold that phallus up straight… The Aristophanes’ comedies were performed with the actors wearing leather phalli as a part of the costume (16) (Figure 3).

Dionysus was followed by the Satyrs, called Sileni in old age, all together worshiped as local rural
deities in fertility ceremonies, in the most distant and isolated areas of the country, before they succeeded to be honored in the Attic theater, giving their name in a kind of drama, the satiric drama (17). Only one whole play has been saved through the ages: “Cyclops” by Euripides and some fragments of the “Tracers” by Sophocles (18, 19).

Ithyphallism in ancient Greek art

The reproductive powers of Nature were usually symbolized by the male generative organ. Phallic symbols have been found by archaeological expeditions all over the world and they are often interpreted as an expression of the human desire for regeneration. A Greek vase from the island of Rhodes (550-500 BC) is quite representative of this rare and distinctive kind of archaic pottery. Phallus vases were used to store perfumed oils, presumably for erotic or medicinal purposes (Figure 4).

It was not unusual for the sculptors to make vases in a wide variety of shapes including human legs, heads and male genitals. These “peniform” vases were used to store perfumed oils, presumably for erotic or medicinal purposes.

The erect phallus was also considered capable to ward off the “evil eye”. Pendants with one or more phalli, some phalli with bells attached to them, (Figure 5) (it was broadly thought that noise scare away malicious human and demon forces) or phalli-birds with wings were worn by citizens, soldiers and children scaring away malicious human and demon forces (20, 21) (Figure 6).

For double protection, two phalli were sometimes grouped base to base so that they pointed in opposite directions. The phalli-jewels were made of a variety of materials, such as bronze, gold, silver, gemstones, ivory, amber or coral.

As amulets, the phalli appear especially potent when rendered in organic materials such as bone, ivory or wood due to the materials’ links with vitality, life and growth (22).
REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS
(*of special interest, **of outstanding interest)


