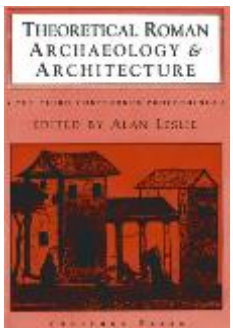

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CHAPTER 1

Alchemy of suffering: hope and faith beyond the healing art in Roman Britain

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While the sick of Roman Britain generally suffer in silence in the archaeological record, on occasions individual voices can be overheard or detected in dialogue with the gods. In the Roman world the development of a system of rational medicine, mostly derived from the Greeks, did not, as might have been expected, banish "irrational" recourse to the healing gods, but rather "healing deities flourished alongside scientific medicine in an almost parallel development" (Jackson 1988, 138).

It is not the purpose of this paper to consider the evidence for medical practice in Roman Britain, but rather to present and contextualise the evidence for specific dealings between men, women, and the gods, dealings beyond the realm of the formalised and scientific healing art.

The purchase and offering of votive objects, or *ex votos*, at religious sites in Roman Britain carried on, or at least did not interrupt, a similar Iron-Age tradition (Wait 1985), a tradition with an even longer pedigree at so-called watery places (Bradley 1990), but in many instances new

forms of *ex voto* were introduced. As has been noted, "it is exceedingly difficult to assess the implications of these new artefacts for Celtic religion, as they may all be no more than new forms of votives introduced by the Romans, which do not conflict with any Celtic beliefs" (Wait 1985, 186). One such type of new votive was the medical or anatomical model, which could nevertheless have been acceptable in the context of the generally recognised Celtic use of miniaturisation in religious situations (Green 1975). These objects in Roman Britain were both custom-made and customised, and it is perhaps their general lack of artistic merit or aesthetic value which has meant that their significance has often been overlooked or underestimated. As has been noted by one commentator, writing on medical *ex votos* from the Greek world, "that beauty was not the primary concern of the dedicators and the manufacturers of these objects, seems to have been little understood" (van Straten 1981, 105). Again, the emotional subtext behind their dedication has been little explored, perhaps in the mistaken belief that emotions are somehow alien to historical culture studies rather than being an intrinsic and necessary part of the study of every society.

Medical *ex votos* from Roman Britain are not common; however, they are not as rare as might be supposed from reading the general literature on Romano-British religion. They come not just from recognised healing shrines but also from other temple sites, for, as MacMullen has noted, "many or most gods could heal" (MacMullen 1981, 49). The range of body parts represented by the British *ex votos* is very limited indeed in comparison with collections from elsewhere in the Roman world (see, for instance, Potter 1985; Blagg 1985; 1986). While conditions of deposition may have led to the absence from the archaeological record of *ex votos* fashioned from certain organic materials it should not be assumed that such objects, say, for instance, in wood, actually ever existed in Roman Britain; at the sacred spring at Bath and at Coventina's Well, sites where the context would have been sympathetic to the survival of organic materials, no such objects were found.

At two British sites, West Hill Uley and Wroxeter, there is some indication of a healing specialisation. At Uley three lead model legs, one with a foot, and a silvered bronze plaque bearing a foot in relief suggest an allusion "to Mercury as the god of wayfarers" and "as an appropriate deity to cure diseases impeding movement" (Henig, in Woodward and Leach 1993). At Wroxeter, during the excavation of the uppermost levels in the basilican area, a number of eyes fashioned from plaster were found; at least thirty positive identifications and some fifty other ex-

amples which "range from the possible to the dubious" are represented. The eyes are in some cases carefully modelled, with pupil, iris, and tear duct being easily distinguishable, but others are crudely and roughly fashioned. They range in size from large and heavy examples to tiny, almost delicate, pieces (Barker et al. forthcoming). There was also found an eye made from a sherd of Samian. From the same area, and found at a different time, came a pair of eyes made from a sheet of beaten gold (Painter 1971) and a fragment of an eye in copper-alloy sheet. From what structure all these objects are derived is uncertain but they obviously relate in some way to a religious site. It is worth noting that from the apse of the basilica at Cirencester came a larger than life-size bronze eye and lid (Wacher 1974, 298), doubtless derived from a statue; caution forbids any speculation about the significance of this find in relation to the Wroxeter material.

Unequivocable *ex votos* also come from religious establishments at Bath, Lydney Park, Springhead in Kent, Muntham Court in Sussex, and Lamyatt Beacon in Somerset, and from the theatre at Verulamium. From Bath was recovered a pair of breasts carved in ivory, which Allason-Jones sees as indicating that the petitioner suffered "from a breast complaint such as mastitis" (Allason-Jones 1989, 157), a sheet-bronze breast, and the well-known tin mask from the culvert of the baths. Henig has suggested that, while the mask could portray a deity, it was probably rather a medical *ex voto* representing "a visitor to the shrine who came to be healed in body or mind" (Henig, in Cunliffe 1988, 8), a suggestion which could have implications for the interpretation of other masks, both full sized and miniature, found in religious contexts elsewhere. Given the nature of the sacred spring deposit at Bath it seems relevant to ask whether some of the gemstones from the site, if they do not represent simple losses or the deposition of a bag of gems by a *gemmarius* (Henig, in Cunliffe 1988, 27–28), could betray in their subject matter a text relevant to this present study. Henig notes in his published catalogue that six of the gems portray deities "especially concerned with fecundity" (Henig, in Cunliffe 1988, 29) while two others include motifs, in the form of corn-ears and poppy-heads, that refer to the same theme. Could not the subject matter of these gems have been particularly chosen for dedication at the spring by women wishing to conceive, already pregnant and desirous of a safe delivery, or in thanks for a problem-free birth?

One of the lead curse tablets from Bath (no. 97) asks that someone "be accursed in (his) blood and eyes and every limb, or even have all (his) intestines eaten away", while another tablet, this time from Lydney,

specifically entreats the deity not to grant any of the family of Senicianus health (Wheeler and Wheeler 1932, 100). A third tablet, this time from London (RIB 7), curses the "life and mind and memory and liver and lungs mixed up together" of Tretia Maria. While it is tempting to suggest the possible extension of this practice of cursing to also include the magical use of models of the cursed person's body parts, there is no evidence to support the existence of such a process in Roman Britain and indeed Tomlin has warned that the curses from Bath were "petitions for justice, not magical spells" (Tomlin, in Cunliffe 1988, 62).

At Lydney Park medical *ex votos* take the form of a bronze arm, with the hand's thumb and forefinger in such a position as to suggest to the Wheelers that the hand "originally held the apple frequently found in this position on ornamental pinheads" (Wheeler and Wheeler 1932, 89), a bronze leg and foot, published by the Reverend Bathurst but not discussed by the Wheelers (Bathurst 1879, pl. XXI no. 3), and a bone plaque on which is incised the figure of a naked, possibly pregnant, woman, though Toynbee later took issue with this interpretation (Toynbee 1964, 361–362) and thus with the Wheelers' statement that the plaque could have been dedicated by "some female worshipper who had received relief in childbirth". A fourth possible *ex voto* is represented by a bronze shod foot, obviously broken off a statuette, but deemed by the Wheelers to have little or no further significance. The Wheelers also believed, following the interpretation of similar material from Epidauros, that the presence of large numbers of specifically female objects, like pins and bracelets, related to dedications connected to women's medical problems.

At Springhead, excavations at the temple site and along part of the temple enclosure ditch recovered a bronze thumb, bent at the joint (Penn 1959, fig. 10 no. 5), a bronze arm and hand (Penn 1964, pl. 1, B), originally thought to be custom made but now considered by others to be a customised fragment of a statuette, and a bronze hand with clasped fingers (Penn 1964, pl. 1, A) which may originally have held some object.

The temple at Lamyatt Beacon also produced two items of customised bronze statuary which can probably be interpreted as *ex votos*, these being a leg and a hand "originally holding a sceptre" (Leech 1986, pl. XXXIV B), both of a size to suggest that they came from figurines. One wonders whether stone statuary fragments, of a foot, a foot and leg, and a portion of a leg, could also be significant?

Three unpublished finds from Kathleen Kenyon's excavations at the theatre at Verulamium are of relevance here; these comprise miniature bronze feet, two ending around the ankle and the third including some

part of the lower leg, which appear to be custom-made anatomical *ex votos* (Hazel Simons, pers. comm.).

Single finds of medical *ex votos* include: a miniature clay leg with foot from the temple site at Muntham Court (Britannia 1980, 192); a small statuette of a naked woman with her arms crossed over her breasts from the temple at Woodeaton in Oxfordshire, a find that the excavator noted could be connected to childbirth (Kirk 1949, 38, fig. 8 no. 7); a bronze leg "attached to a ring and either worn as an amulet or used as a votive at a shrine" is reported from Winchester (see Barker forthcoming); a miniature ivory and bronze breast has recently been recovered from the temple site at Harlow (Britannia 1991, 262); and a stylised clay foot from Segontium (Casey and Davies 1993, 210 no. 512).

One site that has not yet been considered is Coventina's Well at Carrawburgh. No medical *ex votos* as such were found at the site but two particular classes of object recovered from the well may have fulfilled a similar intermediary rôle between the sick and their goddess. Three small bronze masks could be significant, given Henig's comments on the Bath tin mask, though of the three Allason-Jones believes that one (Allason-Jones and McKay 1985, no. 35) was probably "a bucket or cauldron mount", that the second (no. 36) had a similar function or was "intended as a mount for ... a bowl, or even furniture", and that the third (no. 37) was also a mount, though Toynbee had previously commented on this object's portrait-like quality (Toynbee 1964, 63–64 n. 4). A number of leather shoes, or rather shoe soles, also came from the well (nos 123–126), including two shoes that must have belonged to children. Allason-Jones notes that "the discovery of shoes in votive deposits is not unknown" though "these shoes might have found their way into the well as rubbish", but she also notes that they could be medical *ex votos* "thrown in as a request to Coventina to cure some malady of the foot" (Allason-Jones and McKay 1985, 37).

Despite his interpretation of the Chedworth villa as a healing shrine, Webster did not discuss the potential significance of three statue bases from the site, all consisting only of feet, in one case shod in sandals and in another wearing some kind of boot. A bronze plaque fragment, so broken as to only display a panther and a pair of feet, and a life-sized bronze thumb cut from a statue, also come from Chedworth (Webster 1983, 16–20). Could these all be customised for use as anatomical *ex votos*? And what of the "full-size silver eye from a bronze head of a cult statue", according to Webster, found at the Box villa in Wiltshire, another site interpreted by him as being a possible healing cult centre (Webster 1983, 15)?

Manufacture of medical *ex votos* is difficult, if not impossible, to detect from the archaeological record, especially as in Roman Britain customisation of pieces of statues and statuettes seems to have been generally acceptable as a practice, a process with perhaps a further significance of its own, as Merrifield has suggested with regard to the fate of statuary from London (Merrifield 1977; 1987, 96–106). At Verulamium two bronze limbs, one a lower leg and foot and the other a model arm and hand with a prong for possible attachment, were recovered from behind the cellar wall of a building in Insula XIV and may have derived from an earlier bronze-smith's workshop on the site; though these may have been pieces collected for the melting pot they may as easily have been intended as votive objects (Frere 1972, 144 nos 156 and 157). At the Mill Street site, Caerleon, a number of fragments of pipeclay Venus figurines was found, represented by three or four sets of feet, torsos, and separate heads; these are reported to be cleanly broken or cut, though publication of this material must be awaited before its significance can be properly appraised (D. Evans, pers. comm.). Given the well-attested evidence for the customisation of artefacts for religious purposes in Roman Britain it might be worth reviewing the contexts and significance of other classes of material regularly found at religious sites, including face pots and pins with human-head terminals.

But what does this all mean? Some authorities see anatomical *ex votos* as simple to interpret, with the objects being dedicated either in seeking help to obtain a cure or in thanks for having secured one, and occasionally for both. However, there would seem to be a number of concomitant factors that made the process of dedication more complex, not the least of which must have been the individuality of each and every act of dedication, though at the same time dedication would also have been an intensely social act. The *ex votos* themselves can be seen both as instruments and as texts, in the latter instances carrying coded messages, of belief, hope, fear, or alienation, or any combination of these. Human motives are seldom subsumed or revealed in the drama of ritual itself and therefore some attempt to contextualise these objects has to be made using other classes of source material and using an extended geographical and chronological framework. "Ill health and disease are culturally-defined phenomena" (Bush and Zvelebil 1991, 5) and it is impossible to define reactions to them or to understand the cultural definition by reference to the archaeological record alone.

The most overriding need is to try and define the special position of the sick in society. The first writer to address this issue directly was H. E.

Sigerist who wrote that "the position of the sick among primitive people is a magicoreligious one ... the position of the sick in Greek society during classical times was of quite another type" (Sigerist 1977, 390–391), with health in the Greek world being seen as the highest possible blessing and sickness as a stigma or curse, either temporary or permanent. Such a value system was largely adopted by the Romans.

The Roman religions had developed a system whereby individuals could "come to terms with the gods by a process of oath-taking, and fulfilment of contracts" (Webster 1986, 58), a system evocatively demonstrated in the case of Roman Britain by many of the contract-like texts on the lead curse tablets from the sacred spring at Bath (Tomlin, in Cunliffe 1988). On a simple level anatomical *ex votos* could be viewed as indicators of the initiation of a contract, dedicated as part of the process of seeking a cure, or at its completion, with the dedication being an offering in thanks for the cure. However, even if in a diluted or mutated form, the stigma attached to the sick in classical society, defining them as somehow being less worthy and almost outside of polite society, applied in Roman Britain, then the pressure and need to obtain a cure by any means, including by means of contract with the gods, would have been particularly intense. Landy, the medical anthropologist, has written that "who a person is and where he is located in the social and institutional structures strongly influence who presents an illness, or at least the signs that are interpreted as illness, for treatment" (Landy 1977, 388). This may be significant where the sick person, in addition to being outside the world of the healthy and/or in pain, may be culturally construed as being somehow socially alienated and dispossessed. In such a situation the dedication of a medical *ex voto*, either before or after any cure, would also carry an additional meaning relating to the suppliant's desire for re-entry or reintegration into society. The situation is similar to Durkheim's positive theory of ritual, in which religious practices help to sustain the fundamental social structure of a society and ultimately maintain the individual's sense of reality (Durkheim 1961). Here the healer's rôle is a mediating one, that of a cultural broker, and certainly it can be seen that "in most cultures religious rites often concern the management of fear" in this way (Scheff 1979, 128).

How sickness, and what was construed as sickness, particularly affected women's rôle in classical or Roman society is difficult to ascertain, though social pressures upon women to conform with the expected norms of child-bearing and child-rearing must have been considerable. For the élite, and this may also have applied to the native Romano-British

élite, the need to assure the survival of the male line of a family may have been a significant motor in social and sexual relations (Corbrier 1991, 170), and it is known that barrenness was a justification for dissolving a Roman marriage (Corbrier 1991, 171). An actual or perceived stigma attached to the childless woman may have led many to seek help from the gods and goddesses, whose involvement in these instances could therefore again be viewed sometimes as being on more than a purely medical level. Dialogue with a deity would at least allow private emotions, and perhaps an otherwise marginalised passion, to be given a more public voice and there is no evidence to show that the gods in such a situation were any less accessible to women, or less of a perceived comfort to them, in times of real or construed illness or overbearing social pressures.

While the essential individuality of each dedication has already been stressed, it would nevertheless seem churlish not to turn now and examine the large body of epigraphic material relating to the dedication of medical *ex votos* in the Greek world. For here, among the surviving inscriptions, are expressed instances of timeless and universal hopes and fears and possible insights into the motives and mechanics of dedication. It must be noted that the dedication of *ex votos* was often inextricably linked to prayer and sometimes to sacrifice, with the votive representing, on occasions, evidence not for a single religious act but rather for one of a number of acts in an often extended process of dialogue. An *ex voto* could be said to be a prayer made visible.

At the Asklepieion in Athens, inscriptions tell of the occasional dedication of complete representations of individuals along with the more normal dedications of *ex votos* in the form of single body parts. Van Straten, who has compiled an invaluable catalogue of the Greek material, suggested that in such an instance the dedicator "may be overcome by an acute awareness of the vulnerability of his mortal body, perhaps even heightened at the sight of numerous similar dedications in the sanctuary. It would not seem such a bad idea, then, to commend one's entire body to the benevolent attention of the god" (van Straten 1981, 112). In many cases, pain will have become fear and, in extreme cases, fear of death, for "disease forces us to recognise the place of destiny in our lives. It activates our spiritual sensitivity. It directs our gaze towards the eternal" (Sigerist 1977, 389). From the same site come other inscriptions that show that on occasions more than one example of the same body part was dedicated, or even that dedications were sometimes made on someone else's behalf (van Straten 1981, 112–113), instances of a subtlety that would otherwise be lost in the archaeological record.

From the sanctuary of Aphrodite, again in Athens, an inscription implies that the dedication of a pair of breasts is connected with childbirth rather than with any breast problems (van Straten 1981, 115).

At the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis, the dedication of a marble plaque showing a woman's face and neck under a pair of eyes relates, or so van Straten believes, not to a plea for the recovery of sight or the cure of an eye infection, but rather to the Eleusinian Mysteries, a "primarily visual experience" for which "eyes would be appropriate" (van Straten 1981, 122). Eyes also appear in an unusual context at the Amphiareion at Oropos in Boeotia, on a curious relief, dedicated by Archinos. Again here the eyes are not linked to a medical problem but rather they "render thanks for the vision he saw in his dream, which is the main subject of the relief" (van Straten 1981, 124–125). As MacMullen has noted, at the healing shrines were to be found both dreams and health, and contact could be made with the gods there both by the dedication of images "because that was where the gods lived" themselves and "beyond their images ... through sleep ... [and] dreams" (Mac Mullen 1981, 59–60).

It should be further noted that in both the Greek and Roman worlds, dedicated eyes were, in some instances, intended not as models of afflicted parts but as the all-seeing eyes of the gods, requests for their gaze to be directed upon the suppliant's prayer, in the same way that the listening ears of the gods could also be petitioned through the dedication of votive ears (van Straten 1981, 144; MacMullen 1981, 159 n. 79).

Greek sites also produce evidence for footprints, either represented as carvings or simply outlined, dedicated not only with reference to a cure but also either "as proof and memento that the owner of the feet was there" or in representation of "the divine feet" as is attested by inscriptions (van Straten 1981, 144–145).

In the classical world the definition of the medical *ex voto* occasionally went beyond the use of models or representations of body parts, and encompassed clothes, sometimes worn by women during pregnancy or childbirth (van Straten 1981, 99; Blagg 1986, 218 n. 7), clipped or shorn hair (van Straten 1981, 96), cakes in the shape of the body parts affected (van Straten 1981, 115), and shells "in the shape of the womb, suitably filled with dough or clay" (Webster 1986, 60). Ethnographic and wider archaeological studies could probably show an even broader definition in other cultures and societies, and a greater variety in the use of materials, with *ex votos* often being made of cheap and perishable materials which in most situations would not survive in the archaeological record. From

Roman Britain objects made from bronze, gold, pottery, clay, plaster, and ivory are known. We know that terracotta was particularly favoured in Italy, as seen at sites like Ponte di Nona (Potter 1985) and Nemi (Blagg 1985; 1986; Nottingham Museums 1983), both near Rome. Wood was likewise seemingly particularly esteemed in Gaul, as revealed in the remarkable groups of carved *ex votos* from, for instance, the source of the Seine (Martin 1965; Deyts 1983; 1985). The use of wax is attested from the medieval period onwards (see, for instance: Merrifield 1987, 88–90 for British examples; de Beauvoir 1965, 573 for more contemporary usage in Brazil; and Johns 1982, 24 for examples of wax votive phalluses from eighteenth-century Naples).

The eventual disposal of *ex votos* would itself have been a practice with as many variants as their dedication. Retention of *ex votos* after dedication would seem to be a necessity, in that they were, even long after dedication and after their specific original context of meaning had been exhausted, both ornaments and advertisements for the place of dedication (van Straten 1981, 75). Votive and sacred items could be deposited in a *favissa*, a pit for the reception of such objects "no longer needed but still dedicated to a deity" (Barker forthcoming), and we must envisage such a clearing-out of *ex votos* at regular intervals. Whether in Roman Britain objects of precious metal were ever recycled or melted down to enrich the religious establishment, something attested in the Greek world and also much later in the medieval period (Merrifield 1987, 88–90), we cannot say. Such possibilities of extended retention, delayed ritual disposal, or even destruction and recycling of *ex votos* make chronological or typological discussion of the relatively small group of British anatomical *ex votos* impossible. That the latest of them probably come from Lydney and date to the fourth century either shows the longevity and constancy of the idea behind their use, almost a linearity of a particular strain of ancient Greek and Roman belief and ritual, or a conscious revival at that time of an earlier practice, adopted and subsequently discontinued by those sections of society in Roman Britain most open to religious acculturation. This scenario might suggest that the act of dedication was at the earlier period more ubiquitous than the limited archaeological survival of material would seem to indicate. It would be interesting to see Merrifield's theory of later ritual reuse of earlier statuary, part of what Henig has called "the final pirouette of Romano-British civilisation down the road to barbarism" (Henig 1978, 110), rather as being part of, in certain but not all instances, a conscious revival of another classical idea. Could this process not also have links to Scott's vision of an élite-driven

"revitalisation movement" in later Roman Britain (Scott 1991)?

In summary, it is hoped that some new light has been thrown on the crepuscular world of the healing deities in Roman Britain. It has been suggested that the subtlety and potential complexity of the process of dedicating anatomical *ex votos* needs to be recognised. The definition of the special position of the sick within society, and of sub-groups among the sick based on culture, class, or gender, creates a new perspective that may allow more anodyne interpretations of the significance of the healing cults to be reassessed. The reading of signs and symbols, for such are anatomical *ex votos*, can be as superficial or as profound as the reading of any text. But if we define symbols in Baudelaire's sense as the means by which man can aspire to penetrate the temple of nature, then perhaps we are as close to the truth of the past as our distance from it will allow.

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