Short intermezzo

Myths and facts about the penis
In many ancient cultures, the phallus was the symbol of immortality, of eternal rejuvenated life. The Etruscans placed a phallus on every grave.¹ As an externally visible biological characteristic, the phallus has received a heavy religious and moral load in the course of history. So no matter what, studying the phallus always leads us towards the study of religion. Phallic culture was a striking feature in the religion of the ancient Greeks. Herms stood “everywhere” in ancient Greece, not only in front of houses, temples, and city gates but also in front of an acropolis, at markets, and in gymnasia. These squared pillars, with only a bearded male head on top and, halfway up, an erect phallus, were crowned with green branches and anointed with olive oil. During worship, people would place their hand on the herm’s head, and take hold of his beard and then his phallus. Herms were believed to provide protection from thieves and robbers; their main function was to ward off the “evil eye”.²³

At the Piazza della Signora in Florence a statue of Neptune is situated in the middle of an ornamental pond, with bronze fauns sitting around the edge. The naked fauns all have a penis in erection. Whereas the bronze bodies of the fauns show the usual oxidation color, their phalluses are yellow-copper tinted, owing to countless touching by hands. Florentine women believe that by doing this, they can increase their chance of pregnancy. But while this touching takes place in secret in Florence, it occurred openly and without qualms in ancient Greece.

Dionysian festivals illustrated the religious meaning of the phallus. Large phalluses were carried in their processions.⁴ Dionysus was the god of intoxication, of the exaltation caused by wine, the blood of the earth. He was the god of passion, enthusiasm, the god of wild abandonment, which characterized these nightly autumn festivals. These were enormous city festivals that were important state occasions. They attracted onlookers from miles around. Not only were countless phallus images carried in the procession but the participants also tied large artificial penises onto themselves. Apart from this, it was the Greeks in particular who drew a sharp dividing line between the phallus with its symbolic meaning and the same organ as an anatomical part. The phallus was only used symbolically and in rituals.

ETYMOLOGY

In the ancient Greek and Latin languages, there was already a wide variety of names for the male genital organ.⁴ Only a few have been preserved. It is often difficult to discover why one name continued to be used, while others did not. The majority of words were metaphors in relation to length, cylindrical shape, or vertical position. Sometimes the stem of a plant, the shaft of a spear, or the blade of a sword served as a model. But also the vertical warp of fabric (Greek stêma) and the bronze beak of a war-galley that was intended to ram other ships during sea battles (Greek embolon) were used as examples. Ultimately, it became “penis.” The precise origin of the word “penis” remains unclear.
Some language experts believe that the word was derived from the Latin verb “pendere” (to hang). In that case, the vulgar Dutch noun “lul” is not such a bad translation, because the verb “lullen” originally meant “hanging down.” The status of words that originally had a neutral meaning can rise and fall on account of all sorts of factors, from obscene to scientific, and from decent and descriptive to vulgar. Another example of such Dutch word is “kloot” (ball/testicle), which was used by the Dutch poet Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679) in literary language, but is used almost exclusively today as a vulgar expression.

THE PENIS IN ANIMALS

There are many different types of “penis”: the aedeagus of flies, mites, and butterflies; the protuberances that some frogs have near the anus; the organ with which the ordinary honey bee copulates (which breaks off – and costs him his life – but also makes sure that no other drones can mate with the queen); the embolus of the gold spider; the anal fin of fish; the double-jointed penises of snakes; the proboscis of the dragonfly. These are all penises that are used to deposit male sperm cells within the female. Phalluses vary from small protuberances to the penis of a whale, which, although it is usually safely tucked away in his body, can reach a length of 1.8 meters.

The first surgical implantation of a penile prosthesis took place in 1936. To reconstruct a penis amputated during trauma, the plastic surgeon Bogoras used a piece of rib cartilage. He used cartilage because he had observed that many male mammals had a penile bone. Possessors of such a bone, called a baculum or os penis, include the whale, dolphin, walrus, otter, bear, martin, badger, squirrel, wolf, dog, and monkey. In some species of animal – the spider monkey, for example – the females also have an os clitoris.

In 1951, W.R. Bett wrote an extensive article about the os penis. In the whale, the bone is about two meters long, with a circumference of forty centimeters at the base. As species ascended the evolutionary ladder, the bone became smaller. In the walrus, it is only fifty-five centimeters and, in the monkey, one or two centimeters. So far, there is no evidence that Homo sapiens ever had such a bone.

The position and form of the os penis differ from one species to another. In the dog it forms a canal for the urethra. In the bear and wolf, it is indispensable for mating. The os penis appears in many different shapes: in the raccoon it is s-shaped, while in the bat it is forked. The squirrel’s penis has a sharp hook, which, according to some experts, is used to break through the hymen; others believe that it is used to remove so-called mating plugs (figure 1). A mating plug consists of sticky residual sperm, which temporarily seals the vagina of the female squirrel to prevent other males from mating with her.

The os penis of the otter is characterized by its extreme hardness. Healed penile fractures have been observed in these animals. When male otters fight, they aim their powerful jaws and sharp teeth at the penis of their challenger. Sometimes they manage to break the other otter’s penis!
Many mammals have keratinized epidermal spines overlying tactile receptors in the glans dermis, including chimpanzees and mice. Penile spine growth is androgen-dependent: Primates lose spines upon castration and treatment with testosterone restores spine formation. McLean and colleagues reported on human-specific genomic deletion of the Androgen Receptor gene that eliminates an ancestral mammalian regulatory enhancer that drives expression in developing penile spines and sensory vibrissae. This is why humans fail to form penile spines. Ablation of the spines decreases tactile sensitivity and increases the duration of intromission. According to McLean and colleagues, the loss of penile spines in human evolution was linked to monogamous, pair-bonded social systems.
REFERENCES
