

Body, Mind, and Soul: Corruption in the Ancient World

Corruption, defilement, and contamination were constant fears in the ancient world. The *miasma* of the unclean or impious were believed to bring disaster to the entire community. The pollution created by the wrongful actions of others could bring blight that could destroy crops and bring famine, could bring infertility and the death of young children, and could even cause battles to be lost. From the physical defilement of the female body to the mental and spiritual contamination of the powerful, this Panel will explore different forms of perceived corruption in the body, mind, and soul and how it was believed to affect the world around them and what was done to remove the pollution that threatened the health and welfare of the people.

Lucius Cornelius Sulla: Corruption Personified through Plutarch's Lens

In 88 BC, Lucius Cornelius Sulla became the first Roman to lead an attack upon his own city. Though the legitimacy of this action can be debated (does an acting consul have the right to besiege Rome if he believes she is being held hostage by a power-hungry tribune?), Sulla's actions against the city set off a chain of events which would lead to three generations of civil war and the eventual downfall of the Republic itself. While the reception of Sulla has certainly been mixed (with some praising his abdication of dictatorship and others condemning the tyrannical violence he brought into the city), Plutarch's portrait of Sulla is distinctly negative.

This paper argues that Plutarch's use of disease language in *Life of Sulla* demonstrates that we are to think of the general as corrupted. Plutarch takes great pains to fully describe the

moral and physical decline and death of Sulla as he strives to ensure that his readers will come away from the biography with a nauseating view of the Roman dictator. Although Sulla achieved enormous military and political honors, these honors were tainted by corruption. As Plutarch himself says (*Comp. Lys. et Sul.* 1): “during sedition, even the worst man can obtain honor.”

Corruption in the Body: Vaginal Guinea Pigs

Hippocrates’ approach to fertility medicine is incredibly experimental when compared to his other specialties. Judging by the lack of humoral terminology (other than the occasional reference to phlegm), it is clear that Hippocrates himself did not believe that there was a guaranteed method of success. The treatments were often invasive and involved a large number of varying ingredients, such as donkey excrement, young puppies, or human breastmilk. The experimental approach shows that there was no sure way to gauge whether or not fertility medicine was successful outside of waiting for the female patient to become pregnant. This idea was furthered along as couples were not provided any advice on how long to wait to see if the treatment was successful. All of the treatments that were recommended were almost primarily for women. The majority of the treatments were meant to treat the woman for barrenness rather than male infertility. Hippocrates believed that because the offspring developed within the uterus, all cases of infertility must be an issue of the uterus. To conclude, these treatments were more experiments than guaranteed cures. Given that results of the treatment were not seen automatically, nor did they provide results in a small amount of time, there was no sure way to promise success to a couple, further allowing for experimentation.

Corruption Among the Sacred: The Life and Execution of Vestal Virgins

Within Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* and Plutarch's *Life of Numa* there is a great amount of detail on the importance of the Vestal Virgins to the Roman Republic. They were the embodiment of the morality of Rome and as long as their purity remained intact, Rome was protected. However, the desecration of a Vestal who lost her virginity was a blight upon the Republic and a danger to the people within. It was considered such an extreme danger that the method of execution for those Vestals who broke their oaths of chastity was extreme and filled with as much ritual as the rest of the fallen Vestal's life had been previously. It was both an appeasement to the gods for the fall of the sacred and a removal of pollution from their sight at the same time.

This paper explores the importance and duties of a Vestal Virgin, the privileges that they received for their oath of chastity, and why breaking that oath was dealt with both harshly and publicly. Even more importantly, this paper will discuss the methods of punishment for both the Vestal and her lover, the ritualization of those executions, and how the fallen Vestal's execution, and that of her lover, served as a means of social control for the populace of Rome.