MATER PUERORUM, THE HISTORY OF A TERM

In the pediatric treatises of the medieval translations from the Arabic, particularly those of Rhazes and Avicenna, an illness called « mater puerorum » is described. This term was often discussed in the children’s regimens of the Renaissance (1) and in the historical pediatric literature of this century (2) because its meaning is not completely clear (3). The lack of clarity which surrounds this term results from the fact that the aspects of two different illnesses, pavor nocturnus and epilepsy are classified under it.

The aspect of the illness pavor nocturnus is listed under « mater puerorum » in the Practica puerorum by Rhazes (4), whose Arabic original has been lost, or perhaps not yet found again. We quote here the translation after Radbill (5):

Now follows about a certain affliction which is called mater puerorum. This infirmity happens to children in the first period of life frequently. The sign of it is great wailing or much fear during the sleep, and fever increased by the sleeplessness; and from the child’s mouth a foul odor issues forth. The cause of this ailment is the taking of more milk than the child can digest.

The texte just quoted above from the Practica puerorum directly followed the chapter on epilepsy. Nonetheless, Redbill still interprets this illness as epilepsy and not as pavor nocturnus. Let me quote his interpretation (6):

Mater puerorum, the mother of children, is a translation of the Greek hysteria, referring to the uterus or matrix, supposedly the seat of this disease. All through the English literature we read of « the mother » which eventually was supplanted by the « vapours ». Hippocrates called it « pathos paidon », the infantile disease, a term long used for epilepsy in children.

In his suggested interpretation Radbill was influenced to a great extent by Still. In « The History of Paediatrics » Still devotes almost an entire chapter to the discussion of this term (7). However, for his interpretation of the term « mater puerorum » he takes one of two descriptions of the illness, which we will quote below, from another work by Rhazes, the Continens (Kitab al-hawi). Unfortunately, he uses the incorrectly translated section. Nevertheless, he, too, comes to the conclusion that « mater puerorum » is a synonym for epilepsy. This is probably because he wanted to see the term translated grammatically a little bit more freely as « the mother in children ». In his suggested translation he makes the same mistake that the medieval translators make when translating the Arabic texts into Latin: He translates word for word and not syntagmatically (8).

In short, the term « Mother » by itself, came to mean what we know as the globus hystericus, and then a hysterical fit of any sort. Is it not probable that the use of the term in regard to children arose from the supposed similarity of
some nervous attacks in children to the hysterical attacks in women? and indeed a night-terror might well suggest such a similarity, and hysterical fits are not unknown in children. In short, « Mater puerorum » should be translated « The Mother », in children, which gives its real meaning; whereas Children's Mother, or Mother of Children, and still more Mistress of Children, as it has been translated, are misleading.

In his article on « mater puerorum » S. Kottek demonstrated that the term in the Latin translations is actually derived from the Arabic term « umm as-sibyan » (9). For that reason we must digress a bit on the meaning of the original Arabic term and the aspects of the diseases it was attributed with. The enumeration of the various meanings will be presented chronologically.

Rhazes describes « mater puerorum » (umm as-sibyan) twice in his Continens (Kitab al-hawi). In the first reference he mentions a text by Jurjis Ibn Jibril Ibn Bakhtishu, who says (10):

The disease called mother of the children (umm as-sibyan) is a convulsion which occurs together with an acute, burning, dry and severe fever. The urine is white. Small children suffer most because of the moisture [in the mixture] of their nerves.

In translating the homonym /yaslwn/, which can be read either as /yaslun/ = to be exposed to sth., to suffer from sth., or /yasilun/ = to be free, the translator Farragius promptly chose the wrong equivalent and translated /liberantur/, so that his text then became: » ... and children are freed from this disease » (11).

The second reference in the Continens refers to an unknown author and is as follows (12):

Majhul: What is called mother of the children (umm as-sibyan) is a dry convulsion which only children can be healed of. The stricken person often cries and has an acute fever. The skin dries out and the tongue turns dark...

Both aspects of the disease described by Rhazes are characterized by the symptom convulsion. Because they are listed in the chapter on epilepsy and not under other kinds of fits such as apoplexy, tetanus, etc., it might be assumed that he also understood this to be an epileptic convulsion. Both aspects of the disease described in the Continens and their classification deviate from the description in the Practica puerorum. The only identical symptom is that of crying. Together with many other discrepancies between the Practica puerorum and other works of Rhazes, including the missing original of the Practica, the suspicion arises that the Practica puerorum is a pseudepigraphous work compiled from Latin translations, probably not even by Rhazes.

The other author we would like to quote is Avicenna. He writes in the Canon (al-qanun fi t-tibb) (13):

The severe epilepsy caused by black bile is dangerous. If it is caused by phlegm it is usually dangerous. Black bile epilepsy obstructs the pneumatic channels. According to some authors especially the mother of the children (umm as-sibyan) leads to certain death.

In the children's regimen of his Canon, Avicenna does not use the term « mother of the children (umm as-sibyan) for epilepsy, but rather « wind of the children (rih as-sibyan) (14). We will say a few words about this term a little later. Other Arabic authors of the 9th and 10th century who are relevant for the Latin Middle Ages, such as 'Arif Ibn Sa'id and Ibn al-Jazzar, do not use the term « mater puerorum ». They call epilepsy the « disease of children ('illat/marad as-sibyan) (15). That is the translation of the hippocratic term « pathos paidon ». As of the 12th century, the term « mater puerorum (umm as-sibyan) » was used generally as a synonym for epilepsy (16).
How can the designations epilepsy or convulsive fits be explained as « mater puerorum » if we have, then, just rejected the interpretations of Radbill and Still ? S. Kottek showed in his article that artificially constructed etymologies for the term « mater puerorum » are misleading (17). This is an interpretation which we can only endorse, as we have already rejected Still's interpretation, although the Arabic sorely tempts us to find a constructed « etymological » interpretation for the term « umm as-sibyan ».

In actual fact, the term « mater puerorum » originates in Arabic folk-medicine, or rather folklore. In heathen Arabia, it was a common belief that illnesses were caused by demons (18). These beliefs have been retained in the Orient for thousands of years. If a person was not or did not appear to be in a fully conscious state, he was said to be plagued by demons. Often this belief was attributed to entire groups of people, for instance poets or priests (soothsayers). A synonym for epilepsy can be easily derived from this: the priest's or soothsayers illness (marad al-kahini) (19). « Mater puerorum (umm as-sibyan) » can be similarly explained. Behind this term lurks the designation for a female childbirth demon. This female demon derives from the Pantheon of the Sumerians, where she bears the name Lamashutn (20). She is a traditional figure in the folklore of the Orient. In Persia she was and still is called Al (21); in Canaanitic folklore she is named Lilith (22); and in Islamic-Arabic beliefs she appears under the name of « mother of the children (umm as-sibyan) » (23), « wind of the children (rih as-sibyan) » (24), « companion (garina) » (25), « follower (tabi'a) » (26) and other names. The figure of Lilith was certainly quite important for the explanation of this figure in Islamic folklore; in Jewish folklore Lilith developed from the first wife of Adam (27) into an evil demon (28) and later into goddess (29). In the Islamic-Arabic realm various properties of hers have been personified. Two of her names were then integrated into medical terminology. However, here only one of the complaints which the demon caused, i.e., epilepsy, was named for her.

In short, it can be said that « mater puerorum » in the Latin translations of Arabic medical texts is the literal translation of the Arabic term « umm as-sibyan ». With the exception of the Practica puerorum by Rhazes where the aspect of pavor nocturnus is attributed to this term, « mater puerorum » always means epilepsy in the Arabic medical literature. The term itself is derived from the folkloric name of a female childbirth-demon, which, among other things, could bring on epilepsy in children.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

(5) When this lecture topic was first suggested I did not know that S. Kottek already had an article on this subject in print. The discussion of the term 'mater puerorum' amongst the authors of the 15th and 16 centuries is dealt with by him in detail and for that reason I will not go into this point any further.

(5) Radbill (1971) 373. The translation by Radbill was translated back into Arabic by Qasim Muhammad, Mahmud : Ar-Razi fi amrad al-atfal wa-insaya bihim. Bagdad 1979. In addition, there still exists an Italian translation by Passalacqua (1959) 29-43. However, it puts a question mark
next to the term 'madre'. This translation is to be found again in Latronico, Nicola : Storia della pediatria. Torino 1977, pp. 112-117.
(7) Still (1931) 43-46.
(8) Still (1931) 46.
(11) Rhazes : Continens. Brescia 1486; Liber I, cap. 5 : "... et pueri liberantur ex hoc morbo proper multis humiditates existentes in corum nervis."
Avicenna medicorum Arabum principis, Liber canonicis. Basilae 1556, liber 3, fenn 1, tractatus 5, p. 384 E.
(Publications de la Faculté mixte de médecine et de pharmacie d'Alger 3), p. 68.
(17) Ibn Hubal : Kitab al-mukhtarat fi t-tibb. I-IV. Haidarabad 1382-1384/1943-1944, Vol. 3, p. 35 : The misfortune of epilepsy, when it persists, kills. The kind of epilepsy called 'umm as-sibyan' is deadly. It often occurs in children. Only when they have many pustula on their heads and frequently have cataract can they be cured of this illness.
(18) Ibn an-Nafs : Sharh kulliyat al-qanun. Staatsbibliothek Berlin/West, ms. orient., 901, fol. 13r.
(26) Winkler (1931) 58 ; Eilers (1979) 63.
(28) Patal (1967) 221.