

A CAUSERIE ON CIRCUMCISION, CONGENITAL AND ACQUIRED*

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The practice of circumcision is the oldest surgical procedure known to us, and the most extensively performed. If it be said that more than 300 million of the world's population follow the custom, whether it be religious or ritual, assurance no doubt will be forthcoming that this figure is a great underestimate. Islam alone numbers more than 250 million adherents. Muslims everywhere have adopted the practice of circumcision, but with them it is neither a *principium vitae* nor a religious duty, and so the manner and the time of its performance among Turks, Persians or Iranians, Algerians, and Arabs vary from one nation to the next.

Among the Arabs as long ago as 342 BC evidence of its practice has been found and this antedates the coming of Muhammed by many centuries. But a much earlier instance has been found among the ancient Egyptian mummies in the remains of Amenemhet which presented a true case of circumcision, although congenital 'circumcision' cannot be ruled out absolutely. Nevertheless, in the temple of Luxor, situated on the east bank of the Nile in Upper Egypt, 450 miles south of Cairo, I found on the walls of the temple built by Amenhotep III, incised sculpture, still with their original pigments, clearly showing the decorative phalli of the *élite* and pharaonic males, erect and circumcised.

Although the mural exhibitionism at Luxor (Thebes) is some evidence that circumcision was the custom among the high-caste Egyptians, there is no indication that it was the ordinary thing among all Egyptians. That there was some special significance attached to the rite is suggested by the recorded fact that a pharaoh forbade the Hebrew slaves from performing this act, but it would be a mistake to think that the practice of circumcision originated with the Egyptians. There is the anthropological fact that the Australian aborigines have the custom and because of their prehistoric way of life they perform the operation in the manner of Ezekiel, by chopping off the foreskin with a stone knife.

It is very likely that the prophet Muhammed accepted the circumcision of the Arabs as a normal procedure among his Arab people, for it is a curious thing that whereas the Hebrews paid so much attention to the operation that comments on its performance recur throughout the Old Testament, Muhammed makes no single mention of it in *Alkoran*, and this I state only after a most diligent search. Old Arabian poetry refers to it and in very early Arabic there is a special word for 'uncircumcised'.

The Old Testament tells of the circumcision of Abraham in his old age; the *Hadith*, or the book of traditional tales of Islam, states this event to have happened in Abraham's 80th year. The *Hadith* tells also that Muhammed being what he was, was born circumcised, which takes us back to the Hebrew belief that to be born circumcised was to be regarded as the privilege of saints and also attributable to Adam 'who was made in the image of God'. Whereby hangs the story of the rabbi

once being asked why it was that if God created man in his image, He had left man with a foreskin which the Hebrews had been enjoined to remove. The answer given was to the effect that man had been made with a foreskin so that he himself could bring about his perfection by its removal!

THE MUSLIM PRACTICE

Among the Muslims,¹ as I have mentioned, the rite varies in its detail from country to country. For males (I shall refer to females later) circumcision involved the obligatory cutting off of the whole prepuce, although the mucous membrane itself might be left *in situ*. According to one imam, circumcision is permissible at a very young age, not obligatory, but the child *is* obliged to have it done before he reaches 'adult' age. Then again, another school has put forward the injunction that the operation is not to be carried out before the 6th year of the boy's life has come round. Yet another school of scholars insisted that on the 7th day of life the deed should be done. Contumacious controversy raged about the question whether the birthday was to be included in the 7 days.

The looseness of the law of Islam, unlike that of the Hebrews, concerning circumcision is indicative of the lack of prominence attaching to the rite, but the popular regard for the act, especially among the uneducated mass of Muslims, is great. It is not a precept supported by the law. For instance: in one part of Islam, Java, circumcision is regarded by the people as a ceremony denoting reception into Islam; in another part, Atchin, only infidels are required to be circumcised to confirm their conversion to Islam, and Muslims by birth need not be circumcised until as late as the 15th year of life.

In North Africa, where the tradition is held that Muhammed was born circumcised, a child born with a short or absent prepuce is looked upon as a blessing, but a child *with* the foreskin might have it removed at any time between the 7th day of life and the 13th year. A true Muslim must be circumcised, but as has been told there is no defined reason, other than age-old custom, to account for it. But in the language of the Muslim people one finds words with a developmental sense relating the purpose of circumcision to marriage, and some apparently doubtful stories have emerged in the course of time to be repeated again and again in support of this.

In Java, again, the young boy is placed upon the lap of a *santri*, someone who has had many children, for this is believed to encourage fertility in the circumcised. So the different traditional and local suppositions for circumcision to be performed are many and various. A concern for the prevention of preputial phimosis becoming a hindrance to coition is also widely spread, and not only among Muslims; where such is the case, any time before marriage is time enough.

If there are these ideas that the primary purpose for circumcision is to ensure prolific conception in marriage, such ideas are nullified by the fact that the primeval aborigines of Australia who, until quite recently, were living in a prehistoric age, have practised and do practise

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circumcision in its most primitive fashion, and yet were wholly unaware of the necessary relationship between sexual congress and the begetting of children.

Circumcision of the Female

Although the more formal circumcision of the female denotes the amputation of the *labia minora*, the method adopted by the Muslims, among whom it is a recognized procedure, was a simple one without any of the pomp and ceremony which at one period marked a big social event, which amounted to a 'status symbol' for some parents. In Islam there were and are those who regard circumcision of the female as obligatory as it is for the male. But for the female the circumcision meant, simply, the *excision* of a small piece of skin in the most superior region of the vulva. The Arabic tongue has a rather uncomplimentary nickname for 'son of the woman who circumcises females'.

THE CIRCUMCISION

In the Muslim world the surgeon required to do the job was, and still is in some parts, the barber, so the barber-surgeon is not peculiar to the western world. He used a thong to compress the foreskin together, and the boy lay on his back, while the mother used her influence with sweetmeats to divert the child's curiosity and trepidation. In North Africa, the barber uses a knife or a pair of scissors, although the latter instrument is more likely to encourage the wound to bleed.

The Hebrews

Circumcision for the people of Israel has quite a different significance.¹ It is a deeply religious ceremony by which the Jewish infant enters into the covenant with his God. Because of this, it has the greatest meaning for the Jewish people and it has brought much tribulation to them in their long history since the days of Abraham, so that for brief periods of time there have been those among them who have denied the esoteric content of the rite. There was also their time in the desert when circumcision just could not be carried out, although this necessary omission was rectified at the end of that long journey. The surgical equipment formally required for the operation is specific and meaningful although it has altered in small details only through the ages (Figs. 1-3). As many know, at times the circumcision was not without danger from the performer himself, when he did not have the required physical integrity. It will appear from the religious history of the Jews that circumcision *ipsa* has a history of its own.

Great importance is attached to the essential shedding of at least one drop of blood when the child was born circumcised, for the rabbis have ordained that the covenant cannot be entered into without this happening. Even the saintly proselyte who is born circumcised must submit to this condition before he is wholly accepted into Judaism. In the Talmud,² in the tractate 'Sabbath', there is a reference to a dispute between the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel (it appears always customary to have 2 schools of thought) concerning a child who was born circumcised, and the time for whose circumcision would normally have fallen upon the sabbath, and from the dispute which arose it becomes quite clear that the

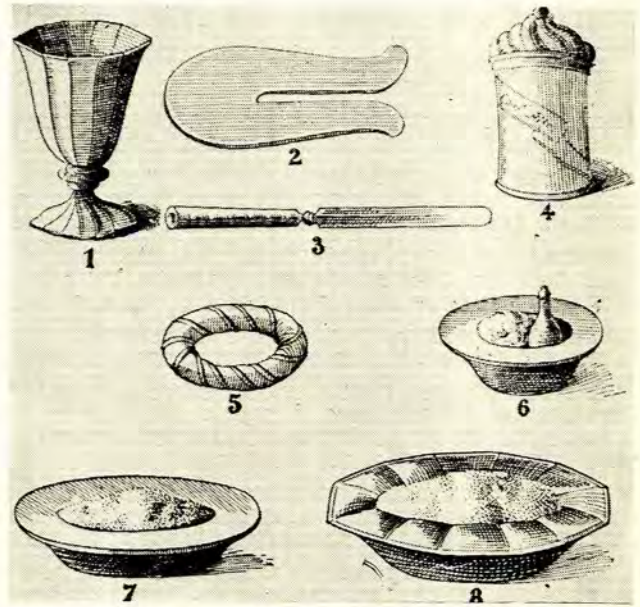


Fig. 1. Implements and accessories of circumcision (18th century). 1 = cup of benediction; 2 = shield; 3 = knife; 4 = spice-box; 5 = tape; 6 = cotton and oil; 7 = sand; 8 = powder. (From Bodenschatz, 'Kirchliche Verfassung,' 1748.)

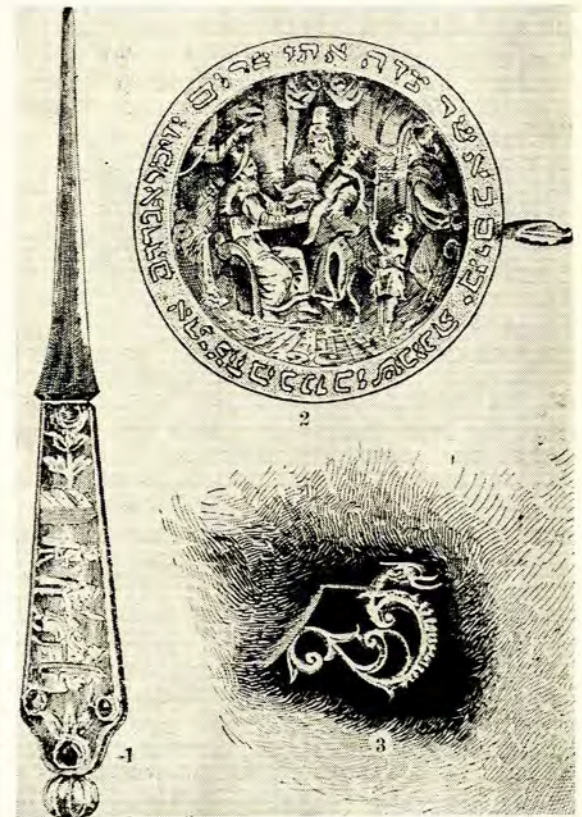


Fig. 2. Articles used in circumcision. 1 = knife; 2 = platter, bearing as inscription *Genesis 21:4*; 3 = handle of platter. (In the Musée de Cluny, Paris.)



Fig. 3. Modern implements of circumcision. 1 = shield; 2 = mouthpiece; 3 = knife; 4 = cup for Mezizah.

not infrequent existence of such children, was a recognized occurrence. It is to be supposed that it is among the Semitic peoples who practise the rite of circumcision conscientiously that observations of this kind, of a child being born circumcised, would be made, for it could have serious doctrinal complications as I have illustrated from the Talmud. Whereas, among peoples where no such significance pertains to circumcision, the ignorance of the parents which still prevails widely on such infantile anatomical details would leave the observation unrecorded, perhaps simply not recognized.

The Gentiles

Among the Western European peoples and their offspring in distant lands there is a never-ending controversy^{7,8} which has almost an annual flare-up somewhere or other, over the question whether to circumcise or not to circumcise the male progeny, and the opposing sides usually bring up the hashed and rehashed arguments to support their contentions, and any new propositions which might have arisen since the last debate. The latest of these to be broached for circumcision, and, I think unnecessarily, even uttered by Jewish writers, is the statement that no single case of cancer of the penis has been found on a Jew who has been circumcised at the beginning of his life, but that the medical literature mentions Jewish men who were circumcised and developed cancer.

In the Widdicombe File^{9,6} of *The Lancet* almost 2 decades ago the pros and cons of the operation brought

out the contentious beliefs and uncertain evidence frequently stated to be factual which eventually fizzled out to their expected termination, each protagonist sticking to his *idée fixe*; these *idées fixes*, besides the question of cancer among the uncircumcised, included balanitis, eczema of the glans penis, meatal ulcer, and the fact that other mammals have sheaths represented by the human prepuce. The biological purpose of the prepuce was also considered.

All over the world an argument for circumcision has been preputial phimosis producing a painful or most uncomfortable erection, but against this assertion, the comparative rarity of a degree of fibrous stricture of the orifice of the foreskin has been estimated as being about one case in 1000 male babies. The question 'Is there such a thing as a baby with phimosis?' was an oratorical question expecting the answer, 'No', but in my experience such a baby does occur and a diagnosis of a fibrous narrowing is not difficult to determine. The asker of the question was convinced that the reasons in favour of circumcision in infancy are a strange mixture of taboos handed down from the dawn of history, of so-called

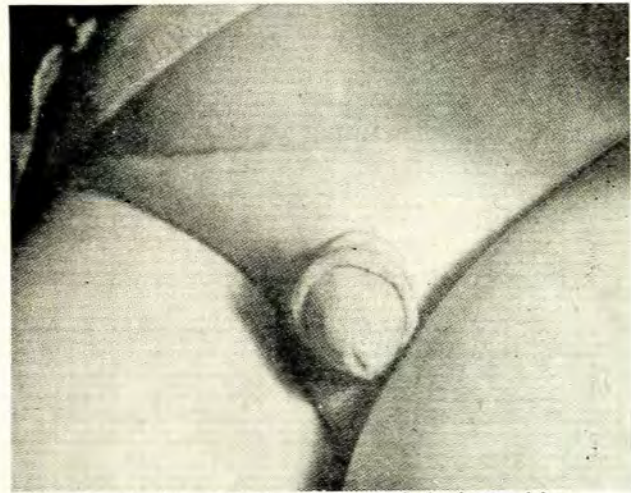


Fig. 4. An example of congenital circumcision.



Fig. 5. Another example of congenital circumcision.

Bible-training, of midwives and 'other old wives' tales and medicine. 'Surgical textbooks are storehouses of unexpurgated tradition.'



Fig. 6. A further example of congenital circumcision.

A couple of years after the publication¹ of what I regard as the first photographic representation of congenital circumcision (Figs. 4-6), and probably the first mention in our medical literature of this anatomical

state of perfection, as some would have it, together with the evidence of hereditary influence, I discovered to my interest that in India, where a Dr Kadir² practised and made his observations, 'it's not unknown to find babies born without a prepuce. Quite a few examples can be collected and some families are known to contain individuals born without the prepuce in successive generations.' However, Dr Kadir did not say whether this was repeated in the third and fourth generations.

SUMMARY

In this causerie many facts and circumstances that have attended the practice of circumcision through the ages have been abbreviated. Nevertheless, in a somewhat general fashion, an indication is given of the significance which different peoples have attached to this operation which, surely, must be the oldest of all surgical operations practised anywhere in the world. Mention is made, also, of the incidence of so-called 'congenital circumcision' which is more of the nature of a congenital anomaly, and the regard which people who practise circumcision pay to it. Wherever this rite or ritual is not tied to religious or other deeply rooted historical origin, there is evidence to suggest that circumcision will prove to be a topic for an ever-recurring discussion, debate, or argument.

I wish to thank the Editor, *Journal of Anatomy*, for permission to reproduce Figs. 4-6.

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