

A Brief Inspection of the Navel

The professor of human anatomy addressed his class of first-year medical students. “In what way, “ he questioned somewhat authoritatively, “was the body of Adam different from all subsequent male bodies?”

The class remained silent, the students looking timorously at the floor or the ceiling, hoping that they would not be called upon. The professor paused and intoned condescendingly: “Adam had no navel since he was not born of woman.” Most students promptly forgot this bit of scriptural arcana since it was not the sort of fact that they were likely to encounter in anatomy examinations. Yet the navel, normally measuring less than an inch in surface diameter and virtually invisible with customary apparel, is central to the fundamental precepts, indeed the core cosmology, of many if not most religions. This inconspicuous belly-button, little more than the residual scar tissue at the site where the umbilical cord had brought oxygen and sustenance to the developing fetus, has evolved into a major cultural icon, ranging in significance from an object of sexual desire to the physical representation of the consecrated center of the universe.

Every language possesses a special word for the navel. The word, *umbilicus*, is the Latin word for navel and appears in a number of medical terms, such as umbilication [pitting] or umbilical hernia.

The ancient Greek word for the navel was *omphalos*. According to myth, Zeus had assigned two eagles, one to the eastern extremity of the world and one to the western edge. He then commanded them to fly toward each other; and where they met was declared to be the center of the world. This locus, called Delphi, was where Apollo, the sun-god, had slain the evil earth-spirit called Python; and so a great dome-like stone was placed on this holy site, a stone called Omphale. A shrine was constructed to protect the world’s center in Delphi; and tradition arose that the priests tending the sanctuary sheltering this stone were endowed with gifts of prophecy, the oracles of Delphi. Emperor Theodosius (346? – 395), believing that the Delphic shrine was a temple of heathen practices, finally ordered its destruction.

Divination arising from a sacred stone (an art called geomancy) was not confined to the rock at Delphi. In Jerusalem, within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, there is yet another Omphale confirming the ancient belief that Jerusalem was both the spiritual and geographic center of the cosmos.

In Song of Solomon, within the Hebrew Bible, the erotic appeal of the navel manifests itself when Sulaimi is lauded: “Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanted no liquor.” Nowhere else does the anatomical navel appear in the Bible although the word, nave (meaning a convex projection, a dome or the boss of a shield) is found in numerous scriptural Books. And then, of course, there is that existential, non-erotic preoccupation called navel-gazing.

Geocentric stones, denoting the geographic center of things, are found in many sites. In Rome, for example, a small stone, called *Umbilicus urbis Romae* (the navel-center of the City of Rome), represents a specific point from which all Roman roads extending to its far-flung Empire were measured. It is situated in the Roman Forum, protected by a modest stone shelter.

What other characteristics define these sacred stones? Certainly their permanence and immobility. The ancient kings of Ireland, for example, were crowned while sitting upon a specially designated sandstone called the Stone of Destiny. But when Fergus entered Argyll to establish his Scottish kingdom in the year 503, he brought the Stone of Destiny with him and re-established it on the holy island of Iona. For the next four centuries, the stone was integral to each Scottish king’s coronation ceremony. In the Tenth Century, the stone was moved to the abbey in the village of Scone where it remained until Edward I of England, in his conquest of Scotland, moved it to Westminster Abbey in 1296 where all subsequent monarchs of England were crowned. On Christmas Day, 1950, four Scottish students stole the stone and secretly returned it to Scotland. The London police retrieved it but British authorities officially returned the Stone to Scotland in 1996, to be briefly returned to Westminster Abbey only when new monarchs are ordained.

Returning to the anatomy lecture hall: Had the professor been more inclined to wander afield, he might have recalled yet another male not precisely of woman born. He might have dimly remembered Shakespeare’s drama, *Macbeth*, wherein Macbeth’s anxieties are vastly diminished when he hears that “none of woman born shall harm Macbeth.” But Macduff, Macbeth’s nemesis, was not of woman, *conventionally*, born: “he had been from his mother’s womb untimely ripped” probably a Gaelic form of cesarian section. But presumably he was nurtured during his intra-uterine stay via an umbilical cord from his mother, and hence was duly endowed with a navel. Both the anatomy professor and Shakespeare are otherwise silent on this subject. It must be presumed that Adam is still the sole male born bereft of a navel.

– STANLEY M. ARONSON, MD

Disclosure of Financial Interests

Stanley M. Aronson, MD, has no financial interests to disclose.

CORRESPONDENCE

e-mail: SMAMD@cox.net