

Hernias, Healing, Hagiography: Faith and Medicine in the Era of St. Artemios

Jonathan Xu, MD*, Octavia Devon, MD

Lahey Hospital and Medical Center, Beth Israel Lahey Health, Burlington, MA 01805

Correspondence: Jonathan Xu, Institute of Urology, Lahey Hospital and Medical Center, 41 Mall Road, Burlington, MA 01803;
(e-mail: jonathan.t.xu@lahey.org)

Introduction: Artemios of Antioch was a Roman general and imperial prefect in the 4th century CE who was subsequently martyred under the reign of Emperor Julian and canonized in the Orthodox Church. Based on a 7th century account of miracles, St. Artemios figured prominently in early Christian incubation rituals in which individuals afflicted with specific maladies would travel to and reside within the Church of St. John the Forerunner in Oxeia waiting to be healed. Many of the healing encounters attributed to St. Artemios concerned genital maladies. We aimed to explore the circumstances surrounding the treatment of these ailments and contextualize our findings within the relationship of faith and medicine during that time.

Sources and Methods: Primary source material was drawn from the 7th century *The Miracles of St. Artemios*. A database of miraculous encounters was created including demographics of the supplicant(s), complaint(s), the medium in which the saint had manifested, and his manner of treatment. Additional secondary sources regarding St. Artemios and Byzantine incubation rituals were identified via PubMed and Google scholar and examined.

Results: A total of 43/45 (90%) of healing encounters compiled in *The Miracles* involved a urologic issue ranging from inguinal hernias and testicular pain to penile sores. Most supplicants were male, age range infant to 70 years. St. Artemios most commonly manifested himself in a dream to the afflicted or their loved one – sometimes as himself, other times in disguise. In several encounters, St. Artemios appeared as a physician. Treatments of genital maladies included medical interventions (e.g. hernia reduction) and nonmedical interventions (e.g. making a sign of the cross, votive offering). Several supplicants sought St. Artemios after failing medical treatment elsewhere. *The Miracles* contain commentary against contemporary medical practitioners in favor of faith-based healing. Nearly all examples of healing took place within or near the Church of St. John the Forerunner in Oxeia, Constantinople.

Conclusions: *The Miracles of St. Artemios* offer a view into the genital maladies of classical Byzantine peoples who sought relief from the divine when contemporary medical practices showed no perceived or actual benefit.

Key words: St. Artemios, miracles, hagiography, genital maladies



Medical practitioners throughout the ages and across various cultures have sought the help of the divine in their quest for healing. The early Christian church was no different. Practitioners such as the Apostle Luke, the brothers Cosmas and Damian, and Panteleimon were canonized on account of their miraculous healing encounters and martyrdom and were often venerated as role models by aspiring physicians and surgeons.(1,2) The fourth century CE saw churches, dedicated to specific saints in eastern and western Europe, becoming popular sites for people

seeking physical healing, giving rise to the ‘incubation’ ritual of early Christendom.

Tracing their origins to the earliest Babylonian and Egyptian civilizations, incubation rituals in the contemporaneous Greco-Roman era (epitomized by that of the god Asclepius) were thought to have influenced the Christian incubation ritual which centered on sainthood.(3) The Christian incubation ritual involved a supplicant who sought healing for an affliction from a particular saint via a dream encounter. In order to attain a physical sense of ‘closeness’ to the saint for such an

encounter, the supplicant either resided or slept in a sacred location associated with the respective saint, which often was a church consecrated to that saint.(3)

One such incubation ritual of the early Byzantine Empire was centered around St. Artemios. According to historical accounts, Artemios of Antioch was a Roman general and imperial prefect of Roman Egypt (*dux aegyptii*) during the reign of Constantius II in the fourth century (Figure 1).(4) During the reign of Julian the Apostate (331-363 CE), Artemios was martyred after refusing to recant his faith and was subsequently canonized by the Church. In turn, Artemios' bones were brought to Constantinople and laid as relics in the church of St John the Forerunner in the hilly neighborhood of the Oxeia (Figure 2). Based on an anonymous seventh century account of healing miracles attributed to him, St. Artemios was often invoked by sufferers of hernias and testicular maladies who lived in or came to the Oxeia. Given that many of these accounts concern genital maladies, we aim to examine the circumstances surrounding the treatment of these ailments and to further explore the complex relationship of medicine and faith during that time.

SOURCES AND METHODS

An online search engine was initially used to identify existing digital and written source material regarding St. Artemios. Translated hagiographical primary source material from the *Miracles of St. Artemios* was then used to compile a database of each miraculous encounter.(4) The database included demographic information regarding the afflicted person(s), their respective complaint, the medium in which the saint was manifested, and the method of healing (Table 1).

Physical affliction was broadly categorized in a manner to best minimize the subjectivity of assigning retroactive diagnoses of medical issues. For example, any affliction describing hernias, including hernias related to scrotal pain, genital discomfort, or coexisting with a described testicular malady, was categorized broadly under "hernia" and were not counted in another category. Afflictions that described testicular pain and boils were categorized under "testicular malady." Online software at WordClouds.com was used to build an aggregate frequency image, with size of the word in the image corresponding to frequency of appearance in the table.



Figure 1. (Left) The megalomartyr St. Artemios (d 362 CE) was originally a Syrian officer who was given the title of '*dux Aegyptii*' and, in 361 CE, was dispatched to Antioch to retrieve the bones of St. Andrew and Luke. (Image, WikiCommons, Public Domain) There, he was summoned by Emperor Julian the Apostate (right) who demanded Artemios recant Christianity. (Roman Coin, British Museum, Public Domain) Artemios refused, was allegedly tortured and beheaded, and his bones brought as relics themselves to the Church of St. John the Forerunner in the Oxeia neighborhood of Constantinople.

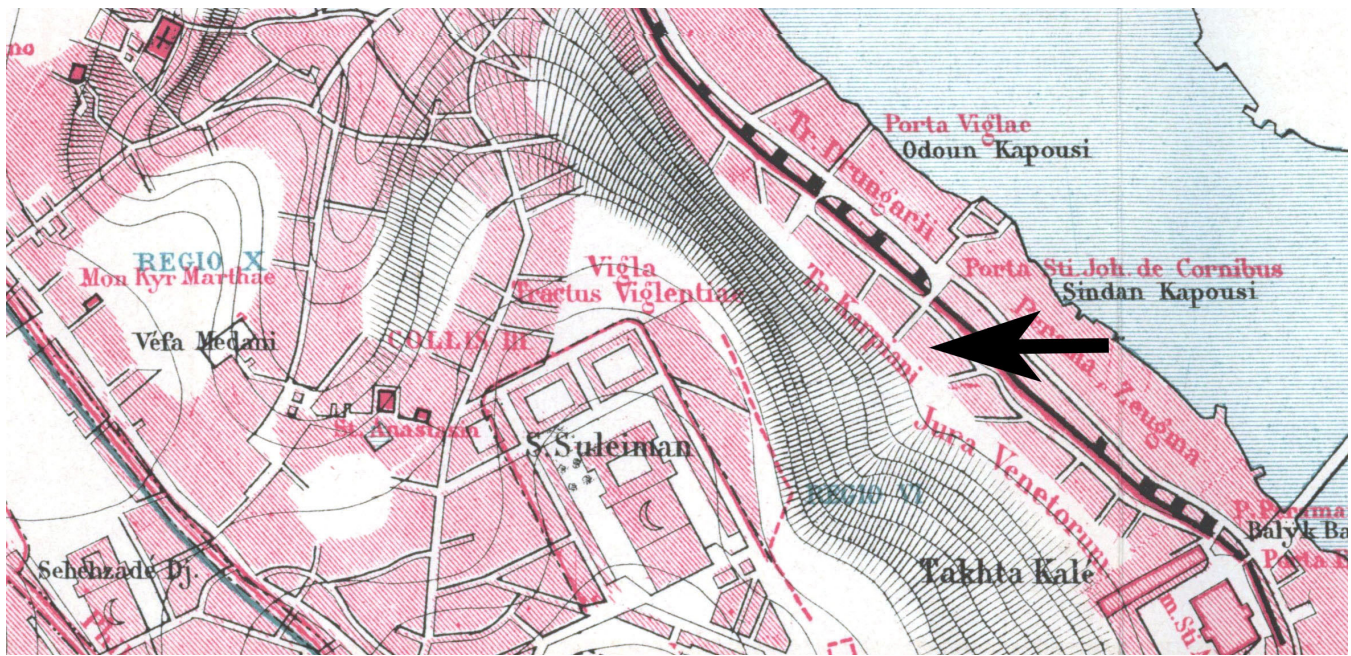


Figure 2. The 'Oxeia', the streets and neighborhood of the *Miracles of St Artemios*. The striking elevation lines show the steep heights of the Oxeia where the bones and relics of St Artemios were brought and stored in the Church of St. John the Forerunner in the 4th century CE. Seen to the right, facing the harbor, is the "Porta St John de Cornibus" (the Latin version of 'Forerunner'), leading into the narrow alleys, that would take the supplicant to the church itself which, according to a 1898 map by A Van Millingen, was just inside and to the east of the gates (black arrow). Now dominating the peak is the 16th century Süleymaniye Mosque, ("S. Suleiman"); the original Church of St. John the Forerunner has long vanished. (Above map by J. Mordtmann, 1891, Public Domain)

RESULTS

According to our database, 41 out of 45 healing encounters involved a urologic issue, including hernias, testicular maladies, and penile sores (Figure 3). In terms of demographic information from these encounters, 97% of afflicted persons were male, with their ages ranging from infancy to 70 years old (Table 1).

The most common manifestation of St. Artemios was in a dream to the supplicant or to their loved one. In a few encounters, Artemios appears to the supplicant when the latter was in an awakened state in the guise of a "stranger" (Miracles #14 and 35). Three encounters notably do not feature any appearance of the saint (Miracles #4,17,21). With regards to dream manifestations, the saint predominantly appears as himself (39%) or in various guises as a family member, friend, or member of the nobility or clergy. In six encounters, St. Artemios notably appears in the guise of a physician (Miracles # 2, 6, 23, 40, 42, 44).

Treatments of genital maladies included "physical" interventions such as "forceful squeezing of testicles", "incision and drainage" (in so far as how they were described in the dream encounter), and faith-based

interventions (e.g. votive offering, making a sign of the cross). Described treatments by the saint are delineated via a 'word cloud' image comparing the frequency of such treatments in aggregate (Figure 4).

All but one of the healing encounters took place within the vicinity of the Church of St. John the Forerunner in Oxeia, a neighborhood of Constantinople (present day Istanbul)(Figure 2). The one exception occurs in Miracle #4, in which the 'young African's son' was healed at sea while the father was *en route* to the aforementioned Church.

DISCUSSION

From the miraculous encounters attributed to St. Artemios, approximately 90% concern a urologic issue. Hagiography of miraculous cures was far from unusual during the Byzantine era, with works including *Life and Miracles of Thecla* arising in the fifth century and a compilation of the miracles of Cosmas and Damian dating to the sixth century. However, the miracles of St. Artemios remain distinct in that there is a predominant focus on a particular anatomic region—specifically male genitalia.(5) Only a few of the miracles of St. Thecla, for

#	Miracle Name	Supplicant Info	Physical Affliction	Treatment	Manner of Appearance
1	Son of Anhimos, the chief physician	20 y/o male	diseased testicles, not able to use lathires	forceful squeezing of testicles	appeared in dream in semblance of patient's father
2	The man with three diseased testicles	45 y/o male	"three testicles"	forceful squeezing of testicles	appeared in dream in semblance of physician
3	The lancing of the Amasrian's boil	u/k age, male	testicular boil	incision and drainage of boil, poultice of the saint's wax	holy servant of God
4	The recovery of the African's son	child, male	testicular pain	creation of votive lamp with wine and oil	no appearance
5	The healing of Euporos, the Chilan merchant	u/k age male, "young"	longstanding hernia, "diseased testicles"	examination and touch	appeared in dream as himself
6	Isidore and the exorcism of the black crow	53 y/o male	testicles possessed by "evil spirit"	examination and touch, exorcism in the form of a black crow	apparition in the guise of a chief physician
7	Plato, the young wogerer	u/k age, male	groin hernia from heavy lifting	trampling on stomach	appeared in dream as himself
8	George, the Phrygian babbler	u/k age, male	swollen testicles	forceful silencing	appeared in dream as himself
9	Theodore, the impatient Rhodian	u/k age, male	hernia	examination and touch, making sign of cross	appearance in dream as servant of God
10	The healing of the silver dealer Akakios' son	7 y/o male	hernia from "evil demon"	faith by response from the boy, making sign of cross	appearance in dream as himself to patient's mother
11	The lady of the double bath of Paschenios	infant, male	hernia	votive offering	appearance in dream to patient's mother as a palace nobleman
12	From the church of the Theotokos to St. John's	infant, male	hernia	examination and touch	appearance in dream as himself to patient's mother
13	From the bath of Dagsitheos to St. John's	50 y/o male	disease of testicles	incision and drainage of abscess, application of plaster of wax to ruptured spot	appeared in dream as disguised figure who pricked patient's testicles
14	A miraculous cure performed at sea	u/k age, male, sailor	disease of testicles	trampling on testicles	disguised stranger on a ship
15	Nases' blasphemy	u/k age, male	swollen genitals	repentance, slaying dove across sick man's testicles	appearance in dream as a nobleman
16	Sergios, the granary guard from Alexandria	60 y/o male	hernia	application of salve to genitals	appearance in dream as Administrator of Granaries
17	Sergios' relative and the Alexandrian actor	40 y/o male	hernia	displacement of condition to another person	no appearance
20	George, the Charitrary - follow up problems	20 y/o male	sore on tip of penis	white vinegar, salt, moistening to the sores	appearance in dream as himself
21	Stephen, deacon of the Great Church	u/k age, male church deacon	"rupture of testicles"	votive offering, prayer, healed after a bath	no appearance
22	The burglary victim	62 y/o male	water in chest, dropsy, "genitals that sank down to his knees"	incision and drainage of right testicle	appearance in dream as himself
23	The priest of the church of the Forerunner and the Persian doctor	u/k age, male priest	sudden hernia	attending church, "customary healing"	appearance in dream in the guise of Persian doctor
24	The betrothed woman	u/k age, female	sudden hernia	wax-salve plaster applied to genitals	Dream urged patient's mother to seek St. Fehronia; attractive woman in monastic garb.
25	St. Artemios, as butcher	u/k age, male	longstanding disease of testicles	piercing lower abdomen with life, cleaning and replacing the intestines	appearance in dream as form of a butcher

Table 1. Miraculous encounters of St. Artemios (#1-25), including known supplicant demographic information, their respective complaint, the medium in which the saint was manifested, and the method of healing.(4) Miracles # 18 and 19 were deemed non-urologic and were not included.

#	Miracle Name	Supplicant Info	Physical Affliction	Treatment	Manner of Appearance
26	Theodore the blacksmith	60 y/o male	longstanding hernia >30 years	inciting fear of castration	appearance in dream, told to go to the blacksmith three times
27	Theoetos, the shipbuilder	50 y/o male, shipbuilder	diseased, swollen testicles >25 years	examination and touch in dream	appearance in dream in form of sailing master
28	The child who fell out of bed	child, male	ruptured intestines, traumatic scrotal injury ("testes flapping in the breeze")	dangling upside down	appearance in dream to patient's mother
29	The healing of the bowmaker	70 y/o male	hernia, unilateral swollen testicle	forceful pushing of testicle "up to intestines"	appearance in dream as someone of the illustrious
30	The tamer, Zonios, and the church warden, Theodore	55 y/o male	ruptured intestines, swollen testicles while running	drinking flasks of olive oil - also led to healing of 4 other men with testicular ailments	appearance in dream as himself
31	Sergia, the highborn woman and her child	child, male	disease of testicles	making sign of the cross over testicles	appearance to patient's mother in guise of her friend
32	Menas, the stevedore	20 y/o male, stevedore	trauma to testicles	prayer, customary offering, examination and touch	appearance in dream as himself
33	Theognos' diseased chest	u/k age, young male	acute pain from hernia	anointing wax-salve ointment to testes of child	appeared as himself in dream to Theognos, the patient's family friend
35	George the Rhodian's encounter in the latrines	u/k age, male shipowner	longstanding hernia in both testicles	forceful gripping of testicles	guise as a stranger in the latrines
36	Sophia's son, Alexander	9 y/o male	sudden hernia	examination and touch in dream	appearance in dream to patient's mother
37	Andrew's hernia	40 y/o male	sudden hernia	examination and touch in dream	appearance in dream as himself
38	The moneylender's son, George	9 y/o male	swollen genitals	making sign of cross over genitals	appearance in dream as himself and with St. Febronia and St. John
40	George of Praxeis' injury and his visit to Constantiophe	18 y/o male (refer to miracle #38)	swollen left testicle from trauma	pushed testicle upward, making sign of cross over abdomen	guise of "handsome newly-appointed doctor"
41	The healing of Polychronios with the mark of the Holy Trinity	18 y/o male	sudden pain in left testicle	lanceet to trace area over afflicted testicle	appearance in dream as himself
42	Artemios' appearance as a physician	infant, male	bilateral testicular disease	surgical intervention	appearance in dream to patient's mother as a physician/surgeon
43	Another child cured	infant, male	pain in testicle	eating cake and applying a cake poultice to afflicted testicle	appearance in dream to patient's mother as himself
44	George, the coppersmith and the imagined operation	30 y/o male	swollen right testicle	binding ligament of L testicle with a cord and feeling of "amputation" of the R testicle. Woke up to find both testicles normal and a cord attached to L testicle.	appearance in dream in guise of a physician
45	The jubbe berries	infant, male	swollen right testicle	spontaneously healing after mother consumed 2 jubbe berries given to her in a dream (she woke up to find a third berry in her hand)	appearance in the form of St. Febronia via dream to patient's mother

Table 1 (continued). Miraculous encounters of St. Artemios (#26-45).(4) Miracles # 34 and 39 were deemed non-urologic and were not included.

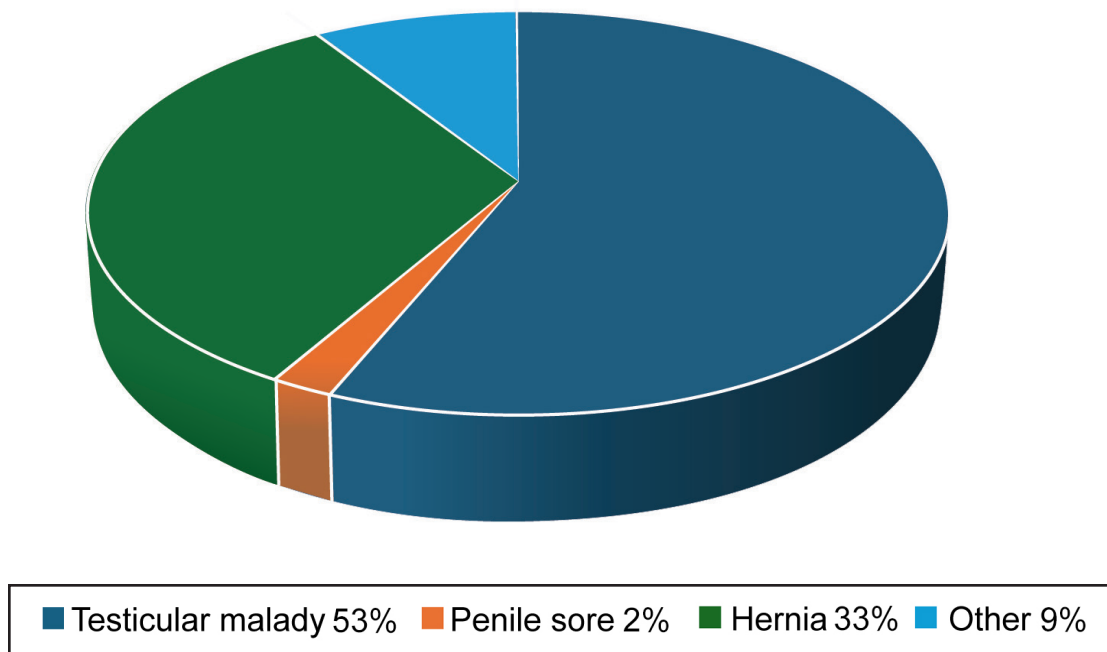


Figure 3. Physical complaints of supplicants in the 45 Miracles of St Artemios illustrating the predominance of urologic problems. When canonized in the St. Artemios later became known as a Patron Saint of Hernias and his feast day is October 20, the date of his execution in 361 CE.

example, concerned physical healing, while the healing miracles attributed to Cosmas and Damian reflect a range of expertise from curing diarrhea to paralysis.(5–7)

While 78% of Artemios' encounters took place in a dream, all his miraculous encounters involve the afflicted person(s) or a family member on behalf of the supplicant undertaking a journey to the Church of St. John the Forerunner in Oxeia. The spatial relationship between miraculous healing and a particular locale thus epitomizes the nature of the incubation ritual and is consistent with incubation practices attributed to other saints of the era such as the second century's Cyrus and John (both d. 310 CE) and St. Therapon of Cyprus (284-305 CE).(6)

With regards to Artemios' appearances, one theory suggests that his method of manifestation may be to mollify anxiety and build familiarity with the supplicant. (5) Alwi argues that a "familiar" disguise—such as a family member, friend, or other respected person(s)—could exist to dispel any "sexual impropriety" between two Christian men, especially given the sensitive nature of many of the ascribed afflictions.(5) It is interesting that Artemios' three appearances as a female figure (including that of St. Febronia) are to mothers incubating their young children, lending credence to the theory of the saint building familiarity with the afflicted (Miracles #24, 31, 45). In that regard, Artemios as a healer is not unlike the

modern-day urologist who, in lieu of disguises, perhaps may use disarming humor and light conversation to build rapport with their patients.

In his encounters, Artemios is depicted as a very "physical" healer, often examining the afflicted body part(s). In seven instances concerning a urologic ailment, Artemios heals his supplicant solely by examining and touching the afflicted area, be it a young infant with a hernia (Miracle #36) or a 50-year old shipbuilder with "swollen testicles" (Miracle #27). In four instances, Artemios cures his supplicant with forceful "squeezing" or manipulation of the testicle. While most of these therapies take place in the context of a dream, the vividness with which the treatment is described and experienced by the afflicted makes the encounter very real to the supplicant. Artemios' physicality with respect to examination of healing is very reminiscent of the healing described in the texts of Paul of Aegina, a seventh century Byzantine Greek physician best known for his *Medical Compendium in Seven Books*. Considered the 'father of early medical writing', Paul built upon the foundation of Hippocratic and Galenic medicine and was among the first to describe surgical anatomy of the abdominal wall.(8) For example, Paul's vivid description of fixing an enterocoele, which he defined as bowel herniating into the scrotum, echoes Miracle #29 in which Artemios places his finger "on the



Figure 4. Word frequency map of terms invoked in the English translation of the *Miracles of St. Artemios*, illustrating the prevalence of the urologic nature of the complaints of the supplicants.

very spot of the testicle where it was diseased" to forcefully push the testicle "all the way up into the intestines."(4,5) That being said, it is often difficult to infer the exact medical issue from a descriptive nonmedical text via assigning a retroactive diagnosis. However, despite the limitations of seventh century medical vocabulary as well as the potential pitfall of translation, the description of the healing of the bowmaker's hernia in Miracle #29 seems analogous to a modern-day manual reduction of an inguinal hernia. That, and other vivid, medical-like descriptions in other encounters suggest that the anonymous author(s) to the *Miracles of St. Artemios* was familiar with and influenced by Paul and other contemporary medical texts of the time.

On the other hand, certain encounters with Artemios also reflect a guarded even hostile attitude towards nascent Western medicine practiced in contemporary Constantinople. Miracle #20 tells of a certain George's penile lesion, which had worsened despite seeking the opinion of several doctors and was ultimately cured by Artemios with a mixture of white vinegar and salt to "moisten the sores." In Miracle #36, a mother named Sophia seeks Artemios to heal her son's hernia because the doctors she had originally seen had "charged too much money" for a potential cure. Miracles #23 to 32 contain the most notable invective against doctors and surgeons. In Miracle #24, a betrothed woman with a hernia was healed after her mother offered a votive candle to St. Febronia (the female analog of St. Artemios). The cure prompted the author of the *Miracles* to ponder "where (now) are the fine-sounding Hippocrates and Galen and the other countless quacks?"(4,9) The contrast in language and heterogeneity of treatments thus not only reflect the diverse opinions of authorship behind the *Miracles* but also the complex relationship

between faith-based and Hippocratic-influenced healing in the Byzantine era.

CONCLUSION

The miraculous encounters attributed to St. Artemios have given him the reputation as the patron saint of genital maladies. The *Miracles* also serve to highlight the importance of the physicality of the Saint's church and its Oxeia environs for incubation rituals to occur. The complex interplay of person, place, and time illustrate the multifaceted dynamic between Western medicine and faith-based healing in medieval Byzantium. St. Artemios still holds a place of importance in the Orthodox Church and he continues to be invoked by sufferers of hernias.

REFERENCES

1. Peltier LF. Patron saints of medicine. *Clin Orthop.* 1997;(334):374-379.
2. Friedlaender GE, Friedlaender LK. Saints Cosmas and Damian: Patron Saints of Medicine. *Clin Orthop.* 2016;474(8):1765-1769. doi:10.1007/s11999-016-4929-6
3. Nielsen T. *Dream incubation: ancient techniques of dream influence.* Published online 2012. www.dreamscience.ca
4. Crisafulli VS, Nesbitt JW, Haldon JF, eds. *The Miracles of St. Artemios: A Collection of Miracle Stories by an Anonymous Author of Seventh Century Byzantium.* E.J. Brill; 1997.
5. Alwis AP. Men in pain: masculinity, medicine and the Miracles of St. Artemios. *Byzantine Mod Greek Stud.* 2012;36(1):1-19. doi:10.1179/030701312X13238617305536
6. Honey LA. *Thekla: Text and Context with a First English Translation of the Miracles.* Library and Archives Canada

(Bibliothèque et Archives Canada); 2012.

7. Festugière AJ. *Sainte Thècle, Saints Côme et Damien, Saints Cyr et Jean (Extraits), Saint Georges*.

Traduits et Annotés Par Festugière AJ et al. J. University of Virginia, 1971. <https://books.google.com/books?id=GtM8AAAAYAAJ>

8. Papapostolou D, Karandreas A, Mavrommatis E, et al. Paul of Aegina (ca 625-690 AD): Operating on All, from Lymph Nodes in the Head and Neck to Visceral Organs in the Abdomen. *Cureus*. 2020;12(3):e7287. doi:10.7759/cureus.7287

9. Busine A. *The Dux and the Nun*. *Dumbart Oaks Pap*. 2018;72:93-112.

10. *Artemios of Antioch*. Accessed June 26, 2023. <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2016/10/20/103005-greatmartyr-artemius-at-antioch>