

“Neurological literature”: Headache (Part 4)

“Existence is just an ache in the head” –

Margiad Evans, diary entry for 23rd November 1949

That headache has been a feature of the human condition since prehistory may be inferred by the finding of skulls with holes cut in them. Such trepanations date from as far back as the Neolithic era, and have been found in Europe, Asia, the Americas, and north Africa.¹ Although their purpose will be forever obscure to us, the possibility that they were undertaken to relieve headache, perhaps through a perception that such surgery would release malign spirits from inside the head, seems at least plausible. Recourse to such extreme, life-threatening, measures may suggest the presence of severe symptoms.

That no record of headache is to be found, as far as I am aware, in the doings of the numinous, extracorporeal, God of the Jews and Christians is perhaps no surprise. Nor that the domestic soap opera of the Olympian gods of ancient Greece, amounting at times almost to farce (e.g. in the Homeric epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey*), should give an example of something so quotidian as headache, specifically in one of the myths of the birth of Athene, the goddess of wisdom.^{2,3} Zeus, ruler of the gods, lusted after Metis the Titaness; she has been identified with the planet Mercury, itself associated with wisdom. Having gained his wicked way with Metis, Zeus was warned by a prophecy that she would bear a son strong enough to depose him, in the same way that Zeus himself had deposed his father Cronos with the assistance of Metis. To avoid this eventuality, Zeus swallowed Metis. However, this was not the end of the matter: “In due process of time, he was seized by a raging headache ... so that his skull seemed about to burst, and he howled for rage until the whole firmament echoed.” Hermes divined the cause of Zeus’s discomfort and summoned Hephaestus, the blacksmith god, who with his wedge made a breach in Zeus’s skull, from which sprang forth Athene, the goddess of wisdom. Hence, our evidence-based conclusion is clear: wisdom is born of headache by way of unsafe sex.

The early Socratic dialogue *Charmides*, named for Plato’s maternal uncle, is ostensibly a search for the definition of *sophrosune* (Σωφροσύνη), variously translated as soundness of mind, self-knowledge, or self-control. Internal evidence dates the action of this dialogue to 432 B.C. It begins with Socrates trying to gain the attention of Charmides by means of suggesting a remedy for the headaches Charmides has been having recently on getting up in the morning (155b). The remedy is a leaf and a charm: chanting the charm at the same time as using the leaf will produce a complete cure, but the leaf on its own is no use at all. Socrates learned the secret from a Thracian doctor whilst on military duty (156d). However, before he will disclose it, the discussion of *sophrosune* must be undertaken. The dialogue ends inconclusively, with the characteristic Socratic aporia; we learn neither the definition of *sophrosune*, nor the headache remedy.⁴ Perhaps the implicit suggestion is that philosophy is the best treatment for headache.

Socrates also makes a passing reference to headache when discussing the subject of education in Plato’s *Republic* (407c):

*If you are always wondering if you’ve got a headache or are feeling giddy, and blaming your philosophical studies for it, you will always be prevented from exercising and proving your talents.*⁵

Charms, with their appeal to the supernatural, may be one of the most ancient forms of headache treatment. John Kirk, medical officer on David Livingstone’s expedition to the Zambesi between 1858 and 1863,⁶ noted amongst the indigenous people the use of charms, such as fruit, for treatment of, amongst other things, headache.⁷

Unlike Plato’s transcendentalism, we may rely on Aristotle for sound empirical observation. In the *Historia animalia*, he reports (Book 5, chapter 31) that those with lousy heads are “less than ordinarily troubled with headache”, but sadly proposes no mechanism for this beneficial effect of the humble head louse. Later, he reports (Book 7, chapter 4) that after conception women experience a sensation of headache in front of the eyes and suffer also from heaviness throughout the body and darkness before the eyes, these symptoms occurring as early as the tenth day. A humoral mechanism is adduced (“according as the patient be more or less burthened with superfluous humours”).

Saints may perhaps have taken the place of charms in Christian iconography. As mentioned in a previous article,⁸ St Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was invoked against headaches because of the manner of his death by stoning. He was not alone: in Brittany, legend has it that there are 7777 local saints, enough to intercede for every eventuality, including Saint Livertin for headaches.⁹ In the Koran (Chapter LVI), when the “inevitable” happens, the “foremost” shall enjoy a cup of flowing wine and “no headache shall they feel therefrom, nor shall their wits be dimmed”.

The abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was a woman of extraordinary intellectual ability, whose works include volumes dealing with illness and medical treatment, the *Causae et curae* and *Physica*.¹⁰ Throughout her long life she had visions, which she believed to be divinely inspired and which she used to inform and illustrate her theological works (e.g. *Scivias*, *Liber divinorum operum*). Writing on “The visions of Hildegard of Bingen”, Charles Singer suggested that “the medical reader or the sufferer from migraine will ... easily recognize the symptoms of ‘scintillating scotoma’”,¹¹ a theme later taken up by Oliver Sacks who found the visions to be “indisputably migrainous in nature”.¹² Indeed, perhaps as a consequence of this, she has attracted the label of “The most distinguished migraine sufferer” (see www.fordham.edu/halsall/med/hildegarde.html).

References

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