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Le sang menstruel : usages, valeurs et contrôles dans la Rome antique

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Menstrual Blood: Uses, Values, and Controls in Ancient Rome

Le sang menstruel : usages, valeurs et contrôles dans la Rome antique

Sophie Chavarria

- 1 Since 1993 and the ground-breaking thesis of French historian Nicole Boëls-Janssen, it is rare to find publications that discuss the powers of female bodies, and in particular of menstrual blood in ancient Rome.¹ There is no mention of this blood in any of our pre-Imperial sources, perhaps due to the limited range of evidence rather than a lack of interest from the Romans. However, each and every Latin author examined in this article has acknowledged their debts to foreign influences, especially Hellenistic philosophy and medicine which started to flourish as early as the 5th century BC. Even though these works contain numerous allusions to Greco-Egyptian practices, it does not mean similar ones were unknown or employed elsewhere in the Roman world at the same time (Aubert 1989, p. 422). As such, this paper analyses how menstrual blood was understood by the Romans, potentially as early as the 3rd century BC.² Unfortunately, Boëls-Janssen's thesis is also one of the very few works that have discussed both the dangerous and beneficial properties of this blood. In her Introduction dedicated to women's apotropaic powers, she explains how "certaines parties du corps féminin semblent avoir été l'objet de précautions ou de superstitions particulières" (1993, p. 4). Indeed, the female nature and its unique powers were associated with several bodily fluids such as urine and saliva, but also the intriguing blood that flowed out of women's bodies every month.³ Following in her footsteps, this paper aims to examine the social representations falling upon menstrual blood, as well as its uses symbolizing one of the most powerful feminine *insignia* in Ancient Rome.
- 2 A more recent number of publications have investigated the role of menstrual blood, including most notably Jack Lennon's article (2010) who subjected this topic to an anthropological enquiry supported by Mary Douglas' (1966) key concepts. Lennon's aim was to demonstrate that menstrual blood was a source of danger and power, an idea further argued in his monograph (2014, p. 56 and 84-85). This paper also builds upon other publications that have qualified Douglas' main theories, and in particular

rejected its binary interpretations (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988, 13-14; Beard 1980 and 1995; Stewart and Strathern 2002, 349-351). Scholars specialising in ancient medicine have also taken an interest in examining the value of such fluid and the origins of practices related to it (Gourevitch 1984, p. 81-103; King 1987; King 1994, p. 106-108; King 2008; Dean-Jones 1989 and 1994; Richlin 1997, p. 202-204; Bodiou 2017, p. 27-42). While works discussing menstruation remain scattered, none of them provide a substantial synthesis of its ambivalent properties as well as its significance in both the symbolic and 'sensible' realms. This article therefore discusses evidence for Roman beliefs and practices related to woman's blood, and further investigates how it was perceived by both the Roman state and the general populace. Literary sources emphasize how menstrual blood was not solely regarded as a dreadful and polluting substance but could be exploited for its prophylactic effects. According to Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*, 28, 82), menstruation was used as a liniment to treat superficial abscesses such as erysipelas. On the other hand, its dangerous properties also protected life itself if employed in a correct manner. In this analysis, I argue that menstrual blood was manipulated to reinforce the (male) state control over women's bodies by acting as another tool for designing rules to control them.

Uses and Values

- 3 In Republican times, Roman attitudes regarding women and their body shifted. Between the third and first centuries BC, the understanding of female anatomy was profoundly influenced by Hippocrates' doctors and Herophilus' works (Scarborough 1970, p. 296, n. 3; Bonnard 2013, p. 34). Less radical than Aristotle, they admitted the existence of a female semen as essential as the male one to the process of *generatio* (Gourevitch 1993, p. 517; Roux 2009; Bonnard 2013, p. 24; Gherchanoc 2015; Bodiou 2017, p. 38). Pliny (7, 66) tells us that menstruation was indeed the "material out of which a human is created" (*quando haec est generando homini materia*), the female equivalent of the male semen. Nevertheless, male and female natures were perceived as opposite, irreconcilable. Scholars have been debating the original cause(s) for such distinction between both human kinds: blood, the vital liquid (Bodiou and Mehl 2017, p. 17), or the presence of an extra organ (uterus) in women's bodies (Bonnard 2013, p. 33) or even flesh, with women being cold and wet while men are hot and dry (King 1994, p. 108; Bodiou 2017). However, women's bodies themselves were perceived in contradictory ways. Between fear and gratitude, respect and suspicion, the female nature was:

bonne et généreuse car elle donne et entretient la vie, dangereuse car son corps est un objet sacré, qui recèle de redoutables pouvoirs (Boëls-Janssen 1993, p. 12).

- 4 Mirroring such views, menstrual flux represented one of its most significant symbols and the most excellent sign of femininity (King 2008, p. 156 and 168). Because women were defined by their ability to give birth and to look after the new life created, those who did not menstruate were seen as sick and infertile (King 1994, 1998, p. 200, and 2013, p. 38-39; Bodiou 2017). On the other hand, a regular flux gave rise to superstitious anxieties among men (Dean-Jones 1989; Gourevitch 1984, p. 93, and 1993, p. 513-514; Newton 2016). Biologically, women represented both a danger and a blessing in Roman thought.

- 5 The most extensive discussions concerning the uses and values attributed to menstrual blood come from Pliny (7, 63-65 with 19, 176-177 and 28, 77-80) and Columella (*On Agriculture* 11, 3, 51). Both authors at length write about the harmful and negative properties of this type of blood. According to Pliny (28, 77), this substance contained outstanding powers that had no limit (*post haec nullus est modus*). Natural catastrophes such as hailstorms, whirlwinds and lightnings could be driven away by a menstruating woman. Menstrual blood could also sour crops, wither fruits and vegetables, kill bees, drive dogs insane, dull the brightness of mirrors, blunt razors, turn linens black, and rust iron and bronze.⁴ No contact with women's blood was required to activate its powers. Columella (11, 3, 50) tells us that a menstruating woman could kill a young plant by merely looking at it (*visu quoque suo novellos fetus necabit*). Finally, this fluid was capable of destroying what could have overcome its most dangerous powers, in particular plants such as rue and ivy, described as having "the highest curative power".⁵ Therefore, a bleeding woman represented a latent threat to humanity.
- 6 In addition to these dreadful properties, scholars have debated the importance of menstruation and its polluting capacity in terms of ritual power (Parker 2007; Lennon 2010 *contra* Beck 2004, esp. p. 509 and Bodiou 2017). Applying Douglas' distinction between 'correct' and 'incorrect' blood, Lennon (2014, p. 90) argues that human blood was the "ultimate matter out of place". It belonged within the body and was a source of power when shed. The blood that leaves the confines of a human body was worrying because it symbolised death (Gourevitch 1993, p. 513). Hence menstruation, like any bodily substance, became a symbolic anomaly when leaving and transgressing the boundaries of the body (Douglas 1966). However, not every anomaly should be labelled as polluting. Instead, they are all powerful while their negative or positive valence comes from cultural constructs (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988, p. 27; Beard 1980, p. 20, n. 70). Building on these theoretical frameworks, historians have attempted to apply these ideas to antiquity. While modern anthropological approaches to concepts of purity and pollution have often been appropriated by those studying the Greek world (Lennon 2014, p. 58; Blonski 2017, p. 22), this is not yet fully true about Rome.⁶
- 7 In the Graeco-Roman world, these anomalies were considered dangerous, and it has been argued that menstrual blood was perceived as a highly polluting substance (Lennon 2014, p. 56-58, 84 and 87). In many ancient societies, women were considered unclean until their menstruation had definitely stopped, hence the female body carried "une tendance particulière à réunir les plus grandes potentialités de « souillure »" (Blonski 2015, p. 57). In the Greek world, scholars have attempted to demonstrate that bleeding women were excluded from certain religious settings (Parker 2007, p. 121-122 *contra* Bodiou 2017). This was not the case in the Roman world. For instance, Roman sources do not present menstruating women as threats to their husbands. Some of them even recommended their readers to have intercourse with their wives during this time of the month to increase their chance of conceiving ; a recommendation that is nevertheless interpreted as an exceptional case by Gourevitch (1984, p. 95-96).⁷ Pliny (28, 44) also seems to believe menstruation was not always a contaminating substance, writing that many illnesses were cured "by either the first sexual intercourse, or the first menstruation" (*multa genera morborum primo coitu solvuntur primoque feminarum mense aut*).⁸ Its powers were also deeply connected with the symbolic notion of fertility and life itself. It was a natural process that should only be feared if it failed to occur (King 1994, p. 108; Bonnard 2013, p. 30).

- 8 Nevertheless, menstrual taboos came into existence to protect men from dangers they believed to be real; dangers embodied by bleeding women. In Antiquity, the removal of polluting substances required the performance of specific purificatory acts designed to expel them beyond the spatial boundaries of society (Lennon 2014, p. 16). Consequently, scholars have usually presumed that women in such states were forbidden to enter consecrated temples or to participate in rituals (Lennon 2014, p. 57). In the Greek world, inscriptions were laid down around the entrances of sanctuaries to control access and avoid any risk of pollution (Augier 2017, p. 95). Henceforth, if the menstrual flux was indeed conceived as a contaminating substance, it then had to be excluded from sacred spaces. However, these ideas are again not found in the Roman world. The city of Rome and its religious protection required that some priestesses performed daily rituals in some of the holiest areas of the city, priestesses mainly belonging to the prestigious College of the Pontiffs: the Vestal Virgins within the *aedes* of Vesta, the *flaminica Dialis* in the *flaminia* (the house of the flaminical couple), and the *regina sacrorum* inside the *regia* (DiLuzio 2016).⁹ Most of these women occupied their function when they were the most fertile and capable of producing children. In the case of the Vestal Virgins, their duties started at the end of childhood, when their bodies became fertile, and ended when approaching menopause. Cleanliness was indeed a significant pre-requisite for communication with the divine, especially for those acting as a medium: the priests and priestesses (Blonski 2015, p. 57). Therefore, if we accept the view that menstruating women were inherently and continually generating an impurity, priestesses would have been kept away from temples and altars. Who would have then replaced them every month during their menstruating period? In the exceptional case of illness, Pliny the Younger (*Letters*, 7, 19, 1-2) says that a Vestal was permitted to leave the precinct of the Atrium.¹⁰ However, it seems unlikely that they would have been replaced every month when menstruating. The proximity between the Vestals, living together in the *Atrium Vestae*, increased their chances of having synchronised menstrual cycles (McClintock 1971, p. 244-245), and therefore reduced the ability to find someone to replace them.¹¹
- 9 The case of the Vestal Virgins is revelatory.¹² These priestesses watched over the sacred hearth of Vesta every day, which included days they menstruated. While fire was one of the most purificatory substance in the ancient world (Roux 1988, p. 63), it could not overcome the powers of menstrual discharges (Pliny 28, 80). Thus, it is surprising that bleeding women were allowed to approach sacred fires if their blood was indeed a threat. Purity was a key condition to meet before transferring anything across a religious boundary (Lennon 2014, p. 45). If menstruation held a symbolic and polluting danger for the city, how can we explain the Vestal Virgins' participation in numerous cleansing rituals such as those of the Argei and of the temple of Vesta herself (*purgamina*)? Many questions arise but no significant answer can be offered for now as our sources do not debate such issues. Cicero and Ovid, whose works provide invaluable insights into the religious practices of the Romans, do not specify any menstrual restrictions in their writings; and when Cato the Elder (*On Agriculture*, 143) details how a proper *matrona* should worship the household gods, he does not mention what would happen if she came to menstruate or fall ill.¹³ Ultimately, there is no convincing evidence that there existed in ancient Rome a ban on menstruating women exercising their religious duties, and menstruation appears as a substance that did not always create an impurity or generate a blemish on people, places, and objects.¹⁴

- 10 As previously evoked, most of the scholarship on this topic has primarily focused on Roman evidence that presents menstrual blood in a negative and dangerous way (Richlin 1997, p. 204; Lennon 2010 and 2014, p. 84; Augier 2017, p. 97, n. 12). However, Pliny also described menstruation as a *miraculum* (28, 70), a term whose meaning held a positive connotation related to wonder and curiosity. Therefore, the powers of menstrual blood held a certain ambivalence as “many people report that such a dangerous substance can restore health” (*multi vero inesse etiam remedia tanto malo*) according to Pliny (28, 82). When listing the numerous powers of this bodily fluid, Pliny (28, 44) further adds that the first menstrual discharge can clear up “many kinds of diseases” (*multa genera morborum*). Several paragraphs later, he introduces menstruation as a key substance to create a wide range of antidotes to cure abscesses, tumours, fevers, and ulcers (28, 82-83). Pliny also includes the properties of menstruation in his dualistic classification of phenomena and objects from the natural world following the concepts of harmony (sympathy) and disharmony (antipathy). Menstrual blood appears then as listed in the recipe of remedies that reversed its most harmful effects, acting as both a poison and its own antidote. For instance, Pliny (28, 23, 5 and 7) tells us that *menses* could polish the mirrors they had tainted and remove the same stain caused by its contact.
- 11 Woman’s blood was thus able to relieve many illnesses, and was therefore included in the list of substances employed by the Romans as part of their knowledge of folk-medicine (King 1998, p. 200; Chavarria 2022). Menstrual blood, alongside the female body, was conceptualised as containing both destructive and healing properties. Both represented threatening entities within society that could nevertheless be employed in various ways for positive outcomes. Despite appearing as an ‘unspeakable’ substance (Parker 1996, p. 102; Lennon 2010), it is clear that this type of blood did not diminish women’s integration into the life of the city of Rome.

Beliefs and their Origins

- 12 As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, our key sources concerning menstrual blood in Ancient Rome have all acknowledged the influence of external views on their own belief systems. Hellenistic remedies became widely diffused in Rome during the Imperial era. They were progressively incorporated into Latin medical writings until being fully appropriated by the Romans themselves. Greek and Latin doctors such as Scribonius Largus and Dioscorides prescribed such cures as early as the 1st century AD (Gaillard-Seux 2014, p. 201-202). Greek and Roman gynaecology can also tell us a lot about beliefs related to the nature and functioning of the whole female body (Rousselle 1980; Gourevitch 1984; King 1987, p. 117, and 1994). It was not the sole privilege of philosophers and physicians: midwives, nurses and the women’s patients themselves possessed a substantial knowledge of the female body (Rousselle 1980; Gourevitch 1984, p. 217-232; King 1994, p. 109-110).
- 13 The large majority of the authors discussing the powers of menstrual blood appear to have also believed in the truthfulness of their statements.¹⁵ Pliny (28, 85-86) clearly believed in some of the claimed properties of menstrual blood. Some views are even presented as based on experiment. Columella (10, 337-341) implies that his knowledge of farming came from first-hand observations by reliable sources. According to Richlin (1997, p. 204), he refers to farmers who reportedly tried several measures before

finding appropriate remedies to the plagues that devastated their fields. Pliny (28, 29) further implies that some practices were based on empirical evidence:

Carmina quidem extant contra grandines contraque morborum genera contraque ambusta, quaedam etiam experta.

We have indeed recorded incantations against hailstorms, different sorts of diseases and burns, which have even been put to test.

- 14 Consequently, beliefs in the powers associated with menstruation might have occurred from 'scientific' experiences, in complement to long-lasting superstitions. For instance, modern science has attempted to demonstrate the existence of a powerful and toxic *menotoxin* (menstrual toxin).¹⁶ While the scientifically established properties of the menstrual flux were perhaps examined and tested by Roman farmers, the same discussions in botanical and agronomical works of Pliny and Columella “étaient à la portée du plus grand nombre, dans une société agricole” (Moreau 2006, p. 330). Thus, we can postulate that some of the views shared by our authors about woman's blood might have been accepted by the community.
- 15 However, the mere fact of believing in the powers of menstrual blood does not necessarily guarantee its common uses by the Romans. The practices detailed by our sources were part of a common core of Mediterranean folklore and traditions, as attested by their different references (Aubert 1989, p. 431). When writing about menstruation, Pliny and Columella often mention foreign authors such as philosophers and authors Aristotle, Metrodorus of Scepsis, and Democritus, as well as physicians and midwives Lais, Elephantis, and Icatidas. However, their recurrences do not mean that similar practices were unknown and unemployed in the Roman world at the same time (Aubert 1989, p. 422; Chavarria 2022).
- 16 While we cannot be certain that remedies based on menstrual blood were regularly used by Roman farmers, they were at least approved of some physicians. As previously mentioned, Pliny gives us an extensive list of medicines and mixtures that required women's blood: it could help contain swelling by making a liniment for gout (28, 82) and relieve headaches when applied to the forehead (28, 85). And despite his rejection of views related to the consumption of human matter, it appears as scientifically excusable in other sources. The ingestion of bodily fluids was prescribed in Antiquity, such as by the philosopher Xenocrates who advocated the absorption of substances that included menstruation to treat certain diseases (Lowe 2013, p. 349, n. 35). On the other end of the epistemological spectrum, magicians and sorcerers commonly included some bodily fluids into their recipes (Aubert 1989, p. 435).
- 17 Indeed, menstrual blood was not simply perceived as a prophylactic substance with a limited medicinal use. Pliny provides us again with some information about the magical properties of this blood, albeit to a lesser extent. He overlooks this aspect, not because menstrual blood was a terrifying and dangerous substance (Lennon 2010, p. 80-81), but because of his own disgust for anything that looks like magic; something he (30, 17) describes as “abominable, ineffective, and worthless” (*intestabilem, inritam, inanem*). Nonetheless, scattered references to magical formulas can be found in Pliny's *Natural History*: enchantments usually attributed to a Persian *magus* (28, 85-86), as well as written spells employing menstrual blood for its contraceptive virtues (28, 80-81). It is thus not surprising to read Columella associating woman's flux with magical powers as well. In his tenth book, he compares a ritual involving a menstruating girl to the

episode of Medea putting to sleep the Colchian Dragon (10, 366-368), thus deliberately emphasizing the magical aspect of certain practices involving this type of blood.

- 18 Even though Greek and Latin physicians agreed that such practices did not belong to the medical arts, scholars nowadays share the view that there was no clear division between folk-medicine based on natural remedies (*physika*) and semi-magical cures before the end of Antiquity (Gaillard-Seux 2014, p. 202).¹⁷ Both of them were part of a set of beliefs focusing on the natural world and the humans' role within it. Thus, in addition to the concoction of cures and remedies, this substance could also protect access to specific spaces. According to Pliny (28, 85-86), thresholds that had been put in contact with menstrual discharges were protected against supernatural danger:

id quoque convenit, quo nihil equidem libentius crediderim, tactis omnino menstruo postibus inritas fieri Magorum artes

it is agreed as well, and there is nothing else I am eager to truly believe, that doorposts touched by menstrual discharges render the tricks of the Magi wholly ineffective

- 19 A few lines later (28, 104), the blood of a hyena is introduced as a prophylactic substance applied to doors to protect them against witchcraft. Doorposts appear as scenes curiously valued by the Romans to perform magic rites.¹⁸ They were also sacred places in front of which sacrifices and burials were practiced in Rome as early as the 4th century BC (Ogle 1911, p. 265-270). Doorposts also held a significant role in Roman superstitions: they were believed to be haunted by spirits (Ogle 1911), especially family spirits, and substances such as dog bile and snake's heads were applied onto thresholds to ward off ghosts (Pliny 29, 67 and 30, 82).¹⁹ Therefore, by acting as a magical screen, menstruation contributed to the protection of these sites, as well as those within. To make sense of such practice, Lennon (2010, p. 79-80 and 2014, p. 85-86) has re-appropriated Douglas' theory of bodily pollution in an attempt to overcome the anomaly presented by the use of woman's blood, a substance he solely conceives as contaminating.²⁰ Because thresholds were vulnerable to pollution, "one would expect the slightest contact between a doorway and menstrual blood to cause a serious pollution" (Lennon 2014, p. 85). He thus presents the Roman *domus* as a representation of the human body itself. Menstrual blood would then be solely dangerous for the 'outside-body' as the fluid flows outwards, not inward. While protecting the inside of the house, it pours its devastating properties on the outside. Accordingly, the act of applying (*tactis*) menstrual blood on a door might have been part of purificatory rites.²¹ Thresholds were vulnerable to blemishes and according to Ovid (*Fasti*, 6, 155), if defiled they had to be purified, notably by throwing water on them. Like dog's bile and water, menstruation thus appears as a prophylactic and purificatory substance used for the same outcome: to protect places from evil spirits (Ogle 1911, p. 254-259). Therefore, the influence of Hellenistic schools of thought does not imply that practices reported by Latin authors were ignored by the people, while the majority of our sources seems to believe in the ambivalent powers of menstrual blood. We have also seen how this blood did not always generate a stain but could also prevent one.

Controls and Justifications

- 20 On a broader scale, the many uses of menstrual blood, and more generally the female body, were connected to a system of values shared by the Roman community. The healthy body of a woman had a civic significance: it demonstrated her ability to

replenish the citizen body (Dean-Jones 1989, p. 191). According to Hippocrates (*Diseases of Women* 2, 119), a woman's health depended on her reproductive activity. Thus, a pregnant woman was a healthy woman (Rousselle 1980, p. 1095; King 1994, p. 108; Bodiou 2017, especially p. 41). Similar views were shared by physicians in the Roman world. For Soranos and Galen, women's bodies were designed for excess; pregnancy and childbirth redressed the balance by making women healthy again (Felder 2018, p. 48). These theories echo Richlin's interpretation of women's bodies as divided according to fluid production (1997, p. 205). Those produced by the lower body could either hurt or help, while those produced by the upper body were only helpful. Based on the Greek concepts of sympathies and antipathies, the fluids of the upper body could also remedy harm caused by those of the lower body; hence Pliny tells us that menstrual blood drove dogs mad but breast milk prevented such effects (7, 65 and 28, 75). This division of bodily fluids that could only be produced by the female body, reflects the social representations of women's roles in Ancient Rome. The production of a fluid in the lower body (menstrual blood) signified that a woman was not pregnant and therefore did not fulfil her primary function within the community. On the other hand, the production of a fluid in the upper body (breast milk) was a positive sign that she had indeed accomplished her duty. She was either pregnant or had just given birth.²² It is not surprising that in a society with a short life expectancy and high infant mortality, the reproductive functions of women were highly valued. Accordingly, a stigma fell upon those who did not meet such social expectations, who did not employ their powers to benefit society.

- 21 Because it was thought capable of driving animals mad, triggering natural catastrophes and even causing the death of men (Pliny 28, 77), this female blood raised serious concerns for patriarchal authorities. They believed it could undermine social order if uncontrolled. Women were a double source of anxiety, both for their husbands and for those traditions established by men (Staples 1998, p. 61). The failure to control them, their bodies and behaviours, could lead to chaos. Livy (34, 2, 13-14) justifies men's control over women by explaining that they not only seek freedom from them but also unrestrained liberty (*licentia*). However, we have already seen that allusions to menstruating women are scattered in our sources. The very mention of menstruation might have been tabooed (Gourevitch 1984, p. 95). According to Richlin (1992, p. 30), terms sharing the root *-fa-* such as *infamis*, *infamia* and *nefas*—what is 'unspeakable'—designated things whose very mention would degrade those that pronounced them. *Nefas* was also employed to denote the result of polluting actions and referred to what should not be spoken about (Lennon 2014, p. 38). Subsequently, I believe this was the case for the menstrual flux, perceived as dangerous when mentioned, unveiled, and exposed.²³ And this is evidently what our authors feared: to experience, with their own eyes, its existence in environments where it ought not to be seen. When a Vestal Virgin was found guilty of *incestum*, she had to be removed from society without being seen. She was transported to the underground chamber, veiled and in a closed litter: her sight could create a symbolic stain (Boëls-Janssen 1993, p. 230). Thus, when hidden, the powers of menstruation remained silent; hence the fact that it did not represent a constant threat to the purity of places and the inhabitants of Rome.
- 22 Revealing this blood had to be achieved through carefully organised rituals. In a ceremony destined to protect young seeds from pests, we learn that a menstruating girl had to walk three times around a garden (Columella at 10, 357-368 and 11, 3, 64), or

around trees and fields (Pliny at 17, 266-267 and 28, 77-78).²⁴ The ritual also required the girl to expose other parts of her body: when walking around the field, her hair had to be untied and her breast exposed. It is thus, the (almost) entire female body that appears as holding apotropaic powers, and this garden ritual illustrates how women's behaviour could be closely monitored. Whether hidden or revealed, entirely or only certain parts of it, the powers of the female body could either be suppressed or spread out, hence the significance of regulating their clothing. Not only where women used to be differentiated based on their social status, but distinctive clothes had to be worn to hide such powerful bodies from sight. In religious settings however, the rules were reversed. Women's hair was sometimes loosened for certain occasions, their feet were revealed in processions to make it rain, and sex workers stripped off their clothes during the annual Floralia (Chavarria 2022). The various uses of menstrual blood and the female body were undoubtedly supervised: they were preferably activated in sacred environments, to contribute to the protection of the *pax deorum*.

- 23 These powers were not always triggered by menstruation itself. Revealing the female body, or one part of it at any time, was required to activate them. For instance, we are told by Pliny (28, 23 and 26, 93) that a woman who was not menstruating could calm a storm at sea by stripping, and that naked young girls could cure patients with inflamed tumours by applying the back of their hands on cataplasms. *Anasyrma*, the act of exposing one's sexual organs (of 'lifting up' the clothing), released these powers by revealing what was forbidden to expose (Suter 2015, p. 24). While references to such actions are relatively rare in the Roman world, the garden ritual discussed above fit into this category as our authors clearly detail how a young girl needed to bleed around the fields, and to do so her dress had to be lifted.²⁵ Following King's definition (1986, p. 62-63), it was an act that released the apotropaic powers of the female body in order to ward off threats. These cases undoubtedly demonstrate how nudity was a prerequisite in procedures that required the female powers to be activated.
- 24 Consequently, numerous strategies were adopted by the Romans in order to accept and integrate women's bodies into the community. These controls are presented with contrasting and diverse ways by our main sources. When menstrual blood is depicted as freely employed and in an individualistic manner, its powers are continually depicted as dangerous. Pliny gives explicit details about how this blood threatened men and their creations. Menstruation was deadly for what is grown from the earth and a fatal poison to men (19, 176-177 and 28, 77). On the other hand, if these powers are activated under a strict male supervision with a collective aim such as curing the illnesses of household members or increasing a farm's productivity (Pliny 28, 82-84; Columella 11, 3, 64), then the outcomes are always presented as positive and beneficial for the whole community. Thus, women could embody menaces to society when menstruating because of the powers associated with a release of this type of blood. However, when the same authors discuss men's uses of the same substance, the tone of their discourse shifts. Woman's blood is not presented anymore as an abomination, for example when we read about men adding their wives' blood to the concoction of 'love potions' (Pliny 32, 49-50), or when they try to control the process of conception, both with the objective to ensure their wives' fidelity.²⁶ These binary and highly subjective views thus need to be carefully examined. Anthropologists have already highlighted our own bias when examining blood taboos: women's prohibitions are always interpreted as a sign of their inferiority, but when men are those forbidden to have contact with the female sphere, it is again interpreted in the same way (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988, p. 13-14;

Stewart and Strathern 2002, p. 349-351). These two kinds of taboos are parallel and yet their explanations differ. Therefore, we cannot be certain that menstrual blood was seen as a fundamentally dreadful substance by every member of the community. However, it is apparent that Roman men were more afraid of its many uses rather than the substance itself.

- 25 However, these normative views attached to menstrual blood were not what were at stake; the problem arose from how these powers were policed and who was controlling them. Whether the state believed in these dangerous properties is not the issue. What truly mattered was to ensure that women remained under men's supervision. While possessing outstanding powers, woman's nature was also defined by a certain 'infirmité', a weakness of mind which justified their need to be constantly supervised (Chavarria 2022). Because men were biologically different from women, they did not suffer from the same *flaws* as women. Therefore, women's bodies had to be strictly supervised by those that were non-female: in other words, the men.²⁷ The presence of powers within women's bodies is best seen as another excuse to legitimize male control over them (Chavarria 2022): menstrual blood became one of the instruments that had to be regulated by those who did not endure such 'states'. Woman's nature, seen as oscillating between its dangerous and good sides, contributed to justifying the various strategies developed by men to integrate female bodies into society without threatening its harmony. When discussing the many virtues of menstrual blood, Lévi-Makarius (1974, p. 29) wrote:

L'action effrayante et maléfique que l'imagination prête à l'impureté sanglante apparaît rassurante et bénéfique quand ses pouvoirs destructeurs se tournent vers ce qui est adverse.

- 26 Symbolic anomalies such as menstrual blood represented threats to social order and male governance. In order to deal with them, specific practices were established to restore cosmic and social boundaries (Douglas 1966). Instead of simply being annihilated, this blood that symbolised a life force was manipulated so that its destructive properties would protect life itself (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988, p. 36). Powerful substances such as menstrual blood needed to be managed in order to produce desired effects and prevent undesired consequences upon the community (Stewart and Strathern 2002, p. 352). Thus, by embodying a serious menace to the male sphere, menstrual blood became another tool for setting up rules designed to control women's bodies and behaviours, despite representing a minor operation in the extremely well-oiled machinery of constraints falling upon women (Chavarria 2022).
- 27 The precautions taken by the state highlight the sacred value given to women's bodies. The extended analysis of menstrual blood's uses and values in this paper has shed light on how the nature of this substance was understood with difficulty in Ancient Rome. Menstruation and the female body generally speaking, were conceptualized as dangerous entities while being praised for their positive influence upon the well-being of the city. It was then vital for the Romans to control their women. To prevent the powers of menstrual blood from targeting them, men had to find an outlet: these powers could only be activated and unleashed in specific environments, always under a strict male control. Usually hidden and protected, the female body could be revealed in a safely secured (magical-sacred) environments. As such, women possessed an immutable power exclusive to their sex (Stewart and Strathern 2002, p. 354-355) that did not lead to women's exclusion from the life of the city. They were not relegated to the margins of society in the shades of their homes by being excluded from rituals. On

the contrary, it became a mean to deepen their integration into a system of values that apparently did not take into account their social status, wealth, or even age.

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NOTES

1. I am very grateful to Dunstan Lowe, Patty Baker and Ada Nifosi, as well as a referee for their helpful comments and criticism on earlier drafts of this paper. An earlier version was presented during the Journée doctorale d'ANHIMA 2018 under the theme 'Corps et pouvoir dans les mondes anciens' and I would like to thank the participants for their reactions and suggestions to some of the arguments presented here. Translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

2. When Nutton (2009, p. 161) dates the first signs of transfer of Greek medicine to Rome. The roles played by women in its introduction are further investigated by the author in her thesis.

3. Those bodily fluids capable to influence nature are briefly listed in Gourevitch (1984, p. 102) and examined in detail in Chavarria (2022).
4. For a summary of key primary sources on the powers of menstruation in Ancient Rome, see Gourevitch (1984, p. 81-103) and Lennon (2014, p. 84-86).
5. Pliny (27, 78) writes: [...] *item novella tactu in perpetuum laedi, rutam et hederam res medicatissimas ilico mori* “[...] young vines are irretrievably damaged by its touch, rue and ivy, plants of the highest curative power, perish immediately”.
6. The most comprehensive study of pollution in the classical world remains Parker (1996). Concerning the Roman world, it is worth mentioning Bradley (2012), a publication arising out of the 2007 conference on ‘Pollution and Propriety: Dirt, Disease and Hygiene in Rome from Antiquity to Modernity’ held at the British School at Rome, and more recently Lennon (2014) to fill the gap for the study of pollution in Ancient Rome.
7. According to the physician Soranus of Ephesus (*Gynecology* 1, 36, translation by Shelton A.): ἄριστος συνουσίας καιρὸς πρὸς σύλληψιν ὁ παυομένης τε <καὶ> παρακαμαζούσης τῆς καθάρσεως, <καὶ> ὀρμῆς καὶ ὀρέξεως πρὸς συμπλοκὴν ὑπαρχούσης (“the best time for intercourse resulting in conception is when menstruation is ending and abating”). Rouselle (1980, p. 1095) also reports how in certain Hippocratic writings, sexual intercourse is presented as beneficial for the womb “by humidifying it and preventing it to move”.
8. Later on (28, 83-84), he explains that fevers can be cured by sexual intercourse under the condition the woman has begun to menstruate.
9. For instance, the *flaminica Dialis* offered a ram to Jupiter on every *nundina*—every eight days—and the *regina sacrorum* sacrificed a sheep or sow on every *kalendae*—once a month. According to DiLuzio (2016, p. 221-222), most priests and priestesses served only part-time as they had varied public and private activities. Nevertheless, in the case of the female officiants, they probably followed the state-instituted calendar which did not take into account their biological clock.
10. Lennon (2014, p. 53) explains that diseases were not tolerated for religious officials, thus explaining the (temporary) spatial exclusion of the sick Vestal.
11. Soranos also reported that Diocles believed menstruation happened concomitantly between women, with regular and equal cycles (Rouselle 1980, p. 1104).
12. Some have argued that the unique and ambiguous status of these priestesses prevent us from considering them as any other Roman woman (Beard 1980 and 1995; Pailler 1995; Scheid 2002; Raepsaet-Charlier 2018, p. 210). Diverging from such views, I agree with the more recent interpretation of DiLuzio (2016, p. 152-153) who sees the Vestal’s sexual status as ideal virgins, adding that: “The Vestals presumably understood the ideological force of their virginity, though other aspects of their identity, such as their sacrificial capacity or their membership in the pontifical college, may have been just as important to their sense of self, if not more.”
13. Parker (1996, p. 102) has pointed out that menstrual blood was barely discussed in ancient Greek texts with the exception of medical treatises.
14. Lennon (2010 and 2014, p. 87) had already noted the lack of religious prohibition on menstruating women but did not attempt to further his investigation.

15. Richlin (1997, p. 200) has already stressed how Pliny, in his discussions of the female body, seems to believe the different uses made of it.
16. A century ago, a duo of pharmacologists had authenticated the observations made about a menstrual poison found in classical literature and folk-medicine (Macht and Lubin 1923). Such views were later challenged, as summarized in Walker (2014, p. 48-49).
17. For instance, Scribonius Largus (17) discarded those who drank the blood of gladiators, explaining that this practice belonged outside the *professio* of physicians. Galen also notoriously dissociated himself from those indulging in magical arts and the practice of soothsaying by stressing the rational basis of his procedures (Nutton 2013, p. 243).
18. Pliny provides many examples illustrating the connection between thresholds and magic: brides had to ritually touch the doorpost before entering her new home to ward off evil (28, 135-136), burying a dragon's head under a threshold was supposed to bring luck (29, 67), hanging bats by the feet over a threshold acted as talisman (29, 83), dog's blood buried under a doorpost protected it against sorcerers (30, 82), iron nails drove into threshold protected adults and children from nightmares (34, 151), etc.
19. Many Roman authors have stressed the collective fear to have spirits haunting the vicinity of their residence. See Ogle (1911, p. 251-253) for a complete list of them.
20. About the connection between αἷμα ('blood') and λύματα ('dirt') at the origin of the Latin term (*pol*)/*lutum* ('stained'), see Dan (2011, p. 8-9).
21. In her discussion of the various Latin terms designating menstruation, Gourevitch (1984, p. 94) notes its association with *purgari* and *purgatio*, underlining a certain belief in its cleansing value.
22. Gourevitch (1993, p. 514-515) explains that menstrual blood was perceived as a malevolent and dangerous substance that could nevertheless become beneficial through conception.
23. Gourevitch (1984, p. 95) had already noted the absence of visual expressions in the Latin language to designate menstrual discharges. However, Dan (2011, p. 11) reports how Lucretius (2, 194-195) had opposed a difference between two terms related to human blood: *sanguis* (the blood unseen) and *cruor* (the blood poured outside the body). For further discussion on the subject, see also Moreau (2006, especially p. 320-321).
24. In his Introduction, Lennon (2014, p. 36-37) argues that encircling a defined space implied the redefinition of boundaries and restoration of order through a purificatory act.
25. See also Ann Suter (2015) for a review of the act of *anasyrma* in the ancient world, especially in religious environments.
26. See for instance this spell for a man who wanted to conjure the womb of his wife to be only accessible to his own semen, so that "she will love you alone and by no one else she ever be laid, just by you alone" (PGM XXXVI, 283-294, translation of E. N. O'Neil).
27. Bodiou (2017, p. 34-37) offers a different origin to the same outcome. It was primarily the 'failing physiology' of the female bodies—connected to changes that appeared during puberty—which justified men's control: "Cette incapacité féminine patente de contrôle d'elle-même et de son corps sert utilement la domination masculine, en particulier dans le cadre conjugal. Le médecin la légitime

scientifiquement”. About the power of medical discourses in making the ‘social’ a representation of the ‘natural’, see King (1994, p. 104-105).

ABSTRACTS

The purpose of this article is to examine the positive and negative properties of menstrual blood in Ancient Rome and its related uses. Building on such premises, I go on to explore the cultural practices involving this ambivalent substance. I argue that menstrual blood and its powers were manipulated to reinforce male order and state control over women’s bodies, becoming an instrument justifying the enactment of new rules to control Roman women. On the other hand, far from pushing away women from public and sacred spaces, the powers of menstruation contributed to strengthen their integration into the life of the city.

Le but de cet article est d’examiner les propriétés positives et négatives du sang menstruel dans la Rome antique, ainsi que ses usages connexes. En partant de ces prémisses, j’explore les pratiques culturelles mettant en œuvre cette substance ambivalente. Je soutiens la thèse que le sang menstruel et ses pouvoirs étaient manipulés afin de renforcer l’ordre masculin et le contrôle de l’État sur le corps des femmes, devenant ainsi un instrument justifiant l’adoption de règles nouvelles pour contrôler les femmes romaines. En revanche, au lieu d’éloigner les femmes des espaces publics et sacrés, le pouvoir du sang menstruel a contribué à renforcer leur intégration dans la vie de la cité.

INDEX

Mots-clés: menstruation, corps féminin, médecine, magie, pollution, Pline l’Ancien, Columelle, pouvoirs apotropaïques

Keywords: menstruation, female body, medicine, magic, pollution, Pliny the Elder, Columella, apotropaic powers

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