

An overview of Pre Historic Era of Obstetrics and Gynaecology

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As a matter of fact ever since humans came into being, not only did the women become pregnant and gave birth to babies normally, but the process must have been abnormal at times and women also must have suffered from pelvic and genital organ diseases, as well.

Unwritten history, however is not easy to interpret, although much can be learnt from the drawings, remains and tools etc of those early people, yet it is difficult to reconstruct their attitude toward child birth and specific ailments of women.¹ Perhaps the women delivered their babies alone or were eased out by others, but they must have been treated in the most mythical, secretive or exteriorized manners. The remedies for their ailments most probably rested mostly on trial and error of herbal usage or were surrounded by demons, superstitions, myths, magic and sacrifice, etc.¹

A script on such a vast subject, can only outline the rise and development of obstetrics and gynaecology over this long period of time.

Concerning obstetrics, at a certain stage paintings of pregnant women and their statues had become common.

There is an old painting on a cave wall in Spain, of a pregnant woman carrying a foetus in her abdomen and another baby emerging from her womb.¹

There is a similar chalk figure of perhaps an expectant female, dating back to the Neolithic bronze age about 2000BC, which was found in a pit at the flint mining site of Grimes Graves in Norfolk, England, which is now kept in the British museum.¹

An extremely old seated figure of a woman (c. 6500-5700 BC) was found in the excavations of Catal Huyak in Central Turkey. This figure is considered to be of a fertility goddess, giving birth in a sitting position, with the baby in between her legs.²

There is evidence that in ancient mythology the goddesses were present at the delivery of women but not the gods. Later, old women were probably involved in this event, but no men were allowed to do so, except perhaps the fathers of the babies being born who came in, just to cut the cord, a custom which still prevails in some cultures.

Concerning Gynaecology, the Aurignacian art belonging to earliest phase of Paleolithic art has been found to be represented by paintings and statues of gynaecological interest. Such examples were found between south west Russia and Spain. But the most famous of all female statues of antiquity is the 'Venus of Willendorf', supposed to be a fertility figure which was found in the loess (light colored fine Clay and Silt deposited by wind) from Western Europe, in 1908. It is supposed to belong to the middle Aurignacian period, about 24000 - 22000 BC.² This figure is now in the Natural History Museum in Vienna.

However according to the abundant evidence, the development of organized obstetrics and gynaecology started in the Indus Valley, where established and progressive civilization flourished around 5000 years ago. A map illustrating as to how the knowledge of medicine and its specific fields spread from this cradle; westwards toward the Middle East and eastwards across India to the Far East; is shown in figure 1.²

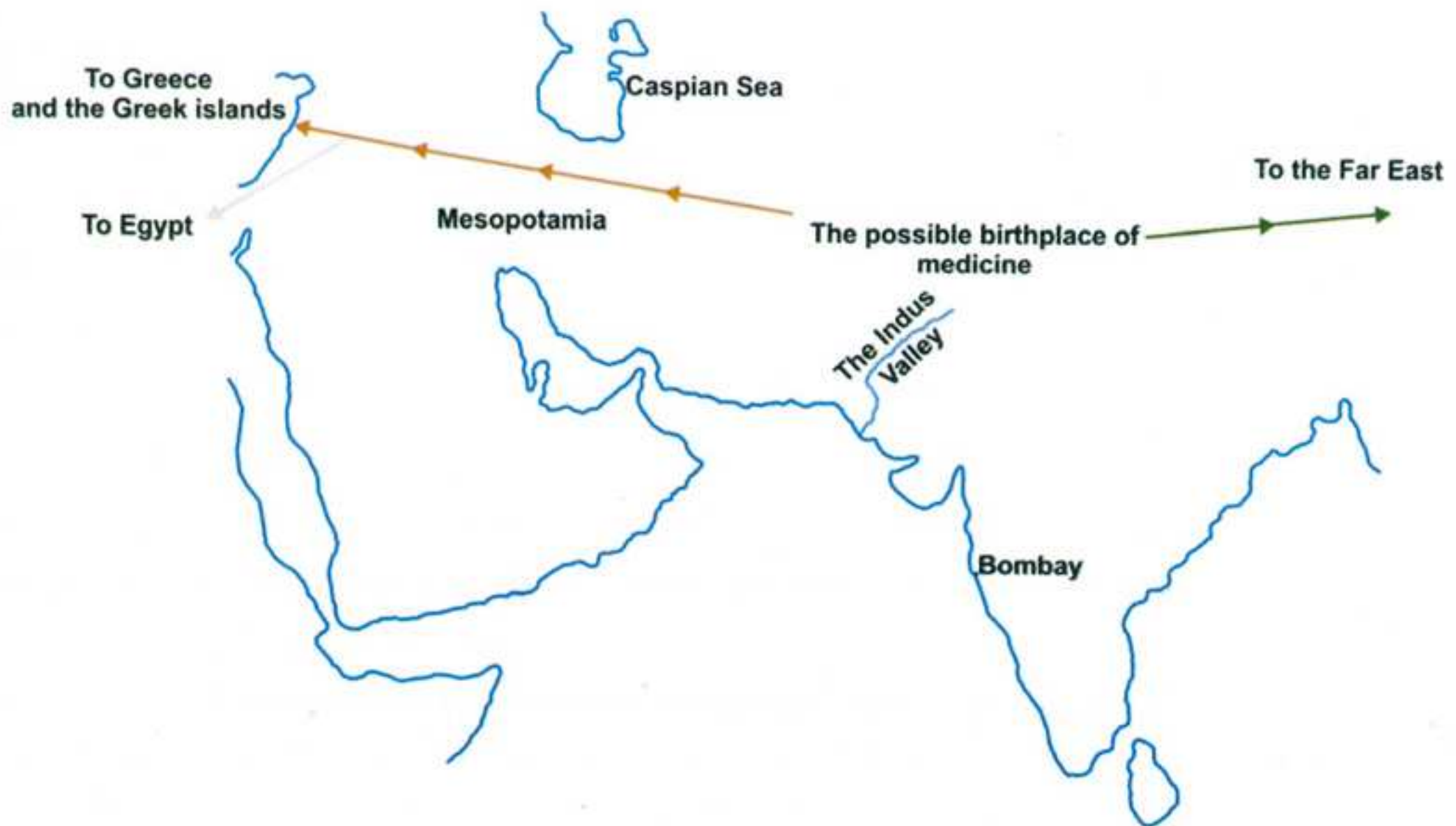


Figure 1. A map showing how the knowledge of medicine and its specific fields spread from the Indus valley to the Middle East and across India to the Far East.

"The obstetrics and gynaecological specificities of various regions of the ancient world will be glimpsed at in a later issue of JSOGP."

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