



"... made her into a healthy young man": Diodor on sex-changing surgery

[Diodor of Sicily](#) was a Greek historian of the first century BCE. For the history of bodies 'between' the sexes, his monumental *Library of history* is important mainly for two reasons. First, his account of the goddess Hermaphroditos is the first elaborate aitiology we have; earlier Greek written sources are [remarkably silent](#). Secondly, the *Library* contains what is to my knowledge the earliest account of a sex-changing surgery, that is, a manipulation of the human body that led to a socially accepted change from female to male status (all pre-modern accounts of 'sex changes' are about women-turned-men). In fact, the *Library* contains many more passages that are relevant for a history of the sexed body (including Diodor's account of the [hyena](#)) which I hope to discuss one day, but these two really stand out.

For Diodor's account of Hermaphroditos, see [here](#) (Greek text and English translation). The story about the woman-turned-man is set in Epidaurus, at the eastern coast of the Peloponnese, not long after the death of Alexander the Great (323 BCE). I give here the English translation, and would only highlight two point on which I have commented already elsewhere on this blog. First, Diodor vehemently insists that there are only two sexes, even if nature sometimes is 'deluding' (see below); hermaphrodites and sex changes are likewise 'natural', and Diodor denounces all talk of '[prodigies](#)' as superstitious. This, I would argue, is very close to the rhetoric of 18th c. authors like [Diderot](#), [who indeed knew and quoted Diodor](#). Secondly, Diodor reports that according to some Callon, the woman-turned-man, was charged with impiety for having been a priestess of Demeter and participated in rites from which all men were excluded. Such charges would rest on the interpretation that the surgery had only brought to light the true (male) sex, not changed it - an interpretation Diodor in my opinion followed himself. Yet I would insist that the surgery nonetheless can be described as the cause of a *legitimate* change of status; it was not the change that was a problem, but rather that with hindsight Callon appeared as a man in female disguise - and hence as having violated the female sphere.

The report on Callo/Callon is found in book 32 of the *Library*, and the following translation is taken from the Loeb Classical Library 409, 454-455. This translation, unlike that of the new 1999 edition, is in the public domain; for the full text, see here: http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/32*.html. As a general introduction to Diodor, and to the textual history (which is a bit complex for book 32), Bill Thayer's Introduction is a good start: http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/Introduction*.html

“11,1 A change of sex under similar conditions occurred thirty years later in the city of Epidaurus. There was an Epidaurian Callo, orphaned of both parents, who was supposed to be a girl. Now the orifice with which women are provided had in her case no opening, but beside the so-called pecten she had from birth a perforation through which she excreted the liquid residues. On reaching maturity she became the wife of a fellow citizen. For two years she lived with him, and since she was incapable of intercourse as a woman, was obliged to submit to unnatural embraces. 2 Later a tumour appeared on her genitals and because it gave rise to great pain a number of physicians were called in. None of the others would take the responsibility of treating her, but a certain apothecary, who offered to cure her, cut into the swollen area, whereupon a man's privates were protruded, namely testicles and an imperforate penis. While all the others stood amazed at the extraordinary event, the apothecary took steps to remedy the remaining deficiencies. 3 First of all, cutting into the glans he made a passage into the urethra, and inserting a silver catheter drew off the liquid



residues. Then, by scarifying the perforated area, he brought the parts together. After achieving a cure in this manner he demanded double fees, saying that he had received a female invalid and made her into a healthy young man. 4 Callo laid aside her loom-shuttles and all other instruments of woman's work, and taking in their stead the garb and status of a man changed her name (by adding a single letter, N, at the end) to Callon. It is stated by some that before changing to man's form she had been a priestess of Demeter, and that because she had witnessed things not to be seen by men she was brought to trial for impiety.”

12,1 Likewise in Naples and a good many other places sudden changes of this sort are said to have occurred. Not that the male and female natures have been united to form a truly bisexual type, for that is impossible, but that Nature, to mankind's consternation and mystification, has through the bodily parts falsely given this impression. And this is the reason why we have considered these shifts of sex worthy of record, not for the entertainment, but for the improvement most our readers. For many men, thinking such things to be portents, fall into superstition, and not merely isolated individuals, but even nations and cities. [...]"