Reading between the lines: Old Germanic and early Christian views on abortion
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ARTICLE X

“Late Antique and Early Medieval Remnants of the Hippocratic Oath: Early General Prohibitions of Abortion,” unpublished article.

[Elsakkers, unpublished]
LATE ANTIQUE AND EARLY MEDIEVAL REMNANTS OF THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH: EARLY GENERAL PROHIBITIONS OF ABORTION

The Hippocratic Oath, a Greek text that is reputed to date back to the fourth or fifth century BC, is a code of ethics for medical practitioners. It has long been used to prohibit doctors from being professionally involved in abortion practices. There are many versions, translations, adaptations and interpretations of the Hippocratic Oath. The passage in the Oath that is used to prohibit abortion is short - ὑπὸ νόμου δὲ νηστεία τρισεκελίδιον φθόριον δώσω. The wording of what is considered to be the ‘original’ Greek version, its meaning, interpretation and translation have been, and still are, a source of debate. It is important to realize that, as Vivian Nutton says, ‘the Hippocratic Oath is not, and never has been, a fixed, unalterable document’. The Oath has been used both as an absolute and a selective prohibition of abortion, that is, to prohibit any method of abortion under any circumstance, and to condemn a specific method of abortion (the pessary), thus allowing abortion in predefined situations. Often the interpretation of the Oath reflects the author’s opinion on abortion, and his moral convictions.

The literal translation of πεσσός φθόριος is ‘destructive (deadly, poisonous) pessary’. Émile Littré’s nineteenth-century translation renders πεσσός as ‘pessary’: semblablement, je ne remettrai à aucune femme un pessaire abortif. W.H.S. Jones (1923) does the same: ‘Similarly I will not give to a woman a pessary to cause abortion’. Both apparently interpret the Oath as a selective prohibition of abortion. For Ludwig Edelstein (1943) πεσσός φθόριος includes any method of abortion. He interprets the Oath as a general prohibition of


2 Some scholars argue that the Oath is (much) younger. This is understandable, because no ancient Greek papyri or manuscripts survive from the pre-Christian era, nor are there any substantial textual references to the Oath from this period. The oldest Greek version we have to a fragmentary third-century AD papyrus (Papyrys Oxyrhynchus 2547v), cf. Barns e.a. 1966, pp. 62-65. We know that Greek texts of the Hippocratic Corpus were available in the Islamic East (Syria, Persia) between the ninth and fourteenth centuries, because we have Arabic translations of the Oath that date back to this period, cf. Jones 1924, pp. 29-33, and Rütten 2007 (CD-Rom; Mittelalter). However, none of these Greek texts have survived.

3 The wording of what is considered to be the ‘original’ or ‘pagan’ text are young (they were copied between the tenth and the sixteenth centuries), cf., for instance, Jones 1924, pp. 2-7, Rütten 1996, pp. 459-460, note 6 and Rütten 1997, pp. 70-72, note 11. The two most important manuscripts of the ‘pagan’ text, usually designated as M and V, are: Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Codex graecus 269, fol. 12-12v (tenth or eleventh century) and Vatican City-Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Codex Vaticanus graecus 276, fol. 1-1v (twelfth century), cf. Jones 1924, p. 4 and Rütten 1996, p. 460, note 6. On the three manuscripts of the Christian oath, see: note 15. In the Post-Salernitan period Greek versions of the Oath were rediscovered, and a number of different Latin translations of the abortion passage in the Oath became available, see, for instance, Rütten 1996, passim.


7 Jones 1923, pp. 298-299, and Jones 1924, p. 11.
abortion, and translates: ‘Similarly I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy’. As Rütten says, πεσονες is then interpreted as a pars pro toto for any method of abortion. The translations of φθιρως as ‘abortive’ indicate that the word is interpreted as ‘destructive of the fetus’, and not, or to a lesser degree, as ‘detrimental to the mother’s health’. Here, too, we must be aware of the biases of some of the Oath’s translators, because it is also possible, and perhaps more accurate, to interpret this passage as a warning of the dangers of using pessaries. The Hippocratic corpus and other ancient medical texts contain repeated warnings about the harmful effects of pessaries for a woman’s health that support this interpretation. Von Staden (1996) interprets φθιρως as ‘dangerous, destructive, deadly’, and translates: ‘And likewise I will not give a woman a destructive pessary’. The modern translations quoted above indicate that the passage on abortion in the Oath is regularly interpreted as a strict, general condemnation of abortion, that is, a prohibition of the destruction of fetal life, but that it can also be read as a selective prohibition of abortion, that is, a prohibition of dangerous pessaries.

The Greek Hippocratic Oath was known in the late antique and early medieval Latin West through a number of summaries, adaptations, commentaries, references, and translations. The oldest Latin reference to the Oath’s passage on abortion is in a commentary we find in the preface to the Compositiones, a medical handbook written by the Roman army physician Scribonius Largus in the first century AD. Scribonius Largus uses the word medicamentum, ‘medicine’, instead of ‘pessary’, thus choosing the ‘strict’ interpretation of the Oath. He interprets the word φθιρως as ‘abortive’ (quo conceptum excutitur), and adds a clause that forbids giving instruction: ut ne praegnanti quidem medicamentum quo conceptum excutitur aut detur aut demonstretur a quoquam medico, ‘that a pregnant woman should not be given by any physician any medicine through which the fetus is expelled, nor should [it] be demonstrated to her’. In his Gynaecia Soranus of Ephesus, a Greek physician, who practiced in Alexandria and Rome in the late first and early second centuries, mentions two interpretations of the Hippocratic texts on abortion that were current in his day.

Soranus, Ποιμένια - Gynaecia
1.19. Whether one ought to make use of abortives and contraceptives and how?

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8 Cf. Edelstein 1943, p. 3.
10 Hanson mentions passages in the Hippocratic Diseases of Women I that speak of the dangers of using pessaries: ‘brings risk that the uterus be ulcerated or inflamed, a very dangerous result’ (De Mulieribus. 1.72), and ‘she is ulcerated in her uterus because of harsh pessaries’ (De Mulieribus 1.67), cf. Hanson 1995, pp. 229-200 plus notes 32 and 37. Soranus warns against irritating and pungent pessaries or suppositories, because they can cause ulcers, lacerations, ‘too great a sym pathetic reaction and heat’ (1.19.61 - 1.19.65), cf. Temkin 1956 [1991], pp. 63-66.
11 MacKinney quotes a number of early medieval texts with direct and indirect references to the Oath (MacKinney 1952, passim); the oldest is a letter written by Jerome in the late fourth century (Epistle 52, PL 22: 539). MacKinney also cites a Visigothic law on the way a doctor should behave with female patients and a passage from one of Cassiodorus’s letters; neither of these texts mentions Hippocrates, but both, as MacKinney says, ‘repeated much of the ideology of the Hippocratic Oath’ (p. 28). See also: Hirschfeld 1928, Jones 1924, and Rütten 2007 (CD-Rom).
12 Scribonius Largus, Compositiones: Hippocrates, conditor nostrae professionis, initia disciplinae ab iureiurando tradidit, in quo sanctum est, ut ne praegnanti quidem medicamentum, quo conceptum excutitur, aut detur aut demonstretur a quoquam medico, longe praeformans animos discentium ad humanitatem (Sconocchia 1983, pp. 2-3); ‘Hippocrates, der Begründer unseres Berufsstandes, hat die wissenschaftliche Unterweisung mit einem Eide begonnen, in dem bei Strafe verboten wurde, daß nicht einmal einer Schwangeren ein Mittel zur Abtreibung der Leibesfrucht von einem Arzte gegeben oder demonstriert werden dürfe, wodurch er das Gemüt der Lernenden von Anfang an zur Menschenliebe erzog’ (Schonack 1913, p. 5). Two recent translations are freer than the German translation. Hamilton 1986 translates: ‘no physician will either give or demonstrate to pregnant women any drug aborting a conceived child’ (p. 214), and Pellegrino & Pellegrino 1988 translate: ‘no physician should give, or even show, an abortifacient drug to a pregnant woman’ (p. 26). Note that conceptum is a neutral noun (n.s.g.n.), whereas, for instance, the early medieval penitentials usually use the masculine conceptus for ‘fetus’.
Soranus tells us that, although some allow abortion if the pregnant woman’s health or life is in danger, adultery and preservation of a woman’s beauty are not regarded as acceptable reasons for abortion. Soranus does not use the word *pessòv* in this context, but in the following sections (§ 1.19.61-1.19.65) he describes various methods of contraception and abortion including pessaries and oral abortifacients. The commentators by Scribonius Largus and Soranus both suggest that there were Greek versions or interpretations of the Oath in the first and second centuries that formulated a general ban on abortion - perhaps there were even texts without the word ‘pessary’.

The three late antique Latin translations of Soranus’s *Gynaecia* are faithful to their original, and do not use the word ‘pessary’ either. Theodorus Priscianus (early fifth century; North Africa) gives a condensed version of Soranus’s text in his *Euporiston*, and adds the woman’s age as a reason for abortion. Caélius Aurelianus’s

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13 Temkin 1951 [1991], pp. 62-63; cf. Ilberg 1927, pp. 45-49. Soranus’s *Gynaecia* was a handbook for medical practitioners, especially midwives, as is evident from the introduction to Muscio’s early Latin translation: ‘Although quite frequently in gynecological matters we have had need of an obstetric, we have found no studious woman who seemed to have learned Greek letters; but if she had had all women’s things translated into Latin for her, she would be able to understand the sense of the writing. (...) I wished to speak very simply; and, to tell the truth, I used women’s words so that even inexperienced obstetrices would be able to understand easily the matter, albeit when read to them by another woman’ (Green 1985, pp. 137-138; cf. Rose 1882, p. 3).


15 The third-century AD papyrus text referred to above has the word *pessòv* and so do many of the late medieval Greek manuscripts. Although I assume that there may have been early Greek texts with an absolute condemnation of abortion, the earliest Greek text of the Oath without the word ‘pessary’ is the so-called Christian Oath in Vatican City-Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, *Codex Urbana graecus 64*, fol. 116 (twelfth century; southern Italy). It reads *οὐδὲ γυναικὶ δόσσα φθόριον, ἀνάθεν τε ἢ κάταθεν*, ‘and likewise I will not give women a destructive thing, neither from above nor from below’ (Rütten 1996, p. 470). Rütten says that “this text reveals the explicit prohibition of any kind of pregnancy interruption, be it via vaginal, anal or oral application” (Rütten 1996, p. 470). Jones gives a different and in my opinion less accurate translation: ‘similarly I will not give treatment to women to cause abortion, treatment neither from above nor from below’ (cf. Jones 1924, pp. 22-25). As far as I know, the oldest ‘pagan’ Oath without the word *pessòv* is in the fourteenth-century manuscript Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, *Codex Ambrosianus B 113 sup*, fol. 2, cf. Jones 1924, pp. 18-21. This manuscript has: *οὐδὲ γυναικὶ φθόριον παρέξω, ‘I will not give to women a destructive (poisonous) thing (substance)*’.

16 *Codex Ambrosianus B 113 sup* also contains a version of the Christian Oath on fol. 203v, cf. Jones 1924, pp. 22-27. The third version of the Christian Oath is in Bologna, MS Bibliotheca Universitaria Bologna (B.U.B., Bononiensis) 632, fol. 28 (15th c.; southern Italy?). The versions of the Christian Oath in the *Codex Ambrosianus* and the *Codex Urbana* are in the form of a cross.
translation (early fifth century; Numidia, North Africa) gives a relatively faithful rendering of Soranus’s Greek,\(^\text{17}\) and Muscio’s translation (sixth century; North Africa) is a slightly shortened version of Soranus.\(^\text{18}\)

Besides the late antique Latin translations of Soranus, and a number of early medieval references to the *Hippocratic Oath*, we find the Oath’s passage on abortion in at least four versions of an early medieval Latin text on medical ethics that may have originally been composed as early as the fifth or sixth century.\(^\text{19}\) This text is not, strictly speaking, a translation of the Oath, but it incorporates passages that seem to have been taken directly from the Oath. The four texts we have are more or less identical, and they seem to constitute a general prohibition of abortion, because they use general terms for ‘abortifacient’ (*medicamentum, abortivum*) and not the word ‘pessary’. The oldest text is in the *Lorscher Arzneibuch*, an early medieval medical handbook.\(^\text{20}\)

\[\text{Lorscher Arzneibuch, Bamberg, Staatliche Bibliothek, Codex Bambergensis medicinalis 1 (olim L.III 8), fol. 6r (c. 795; Lorsch)}\]

\[\ldots\) non etiam datum medicamentum mortale nec ad mulieribus persuasus abortivum dandum neque interesse tali consilio, sed inmaculare et sancte perseverare.\(^\text{21}\)

‘[he should] also not give a deadly medicine, nor be persuaded by women to give an abortifacient, nor be concerned with such advice, but remain pure and holy’.

\[\text{Codex Sangallensis 751, St. Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, p. 356 (second half ninth century; Italy?)}\]

Non etiam dandum medicamentum mortale nec mulieribus per suae vapores [per suae vapores = persuasus?] abortivo dandum nec in terris sed [in terris sed = interesse?] tamen [tule?] consilium, sed inmaculare et sanctitate perseverare.\(^\text{22}\)

Schaden ihre Rettung erreichen können. Ich will deshalb an dieser Stelle die anzuwendenden Mittel angeben (Meyer 1909, p. 291).

\[\text{Caecilius Aurelianus, Gynaecia, 82. Utrum medicaminibus conceptionem prohibentibus vel factum rumpentibus utendum sit vel quomodo? Inhibens medicamen a corrumpenti plurimum differt. Illud enim prohibit, illud factam detractit conceptionem. Ypocrates denique [cum libro quem vocavit] cum corruptiva dari medicamina prohibit, libro quem De puerili natura conversipit discretionis causa iussit feminas suo saltu naticarum fibras pari plantarum percussu pultare. set de his huius apud veteres magna certatio. ali enim usum medicaminorum corrumpentium prohibentibus aiunt nulli debere dari preganti, siquidem sit medicine salvare potius quam vexare, nascentiumque proieceto natura fuerit nutrienda. ali adutleri conceptus causa aut servande pulcritudinis uterum rumpere noluerunt. illa vero danda probant que periculum partus declinant, ne parve matricis causa et minus implere volentis officium mortis sequatur effectus; vel si in ore matricis aliqua fuerint condilomata procreata; vel horum que similia impedimento fuerint. jubis et nos attestasur. set nunc quoniam a corruptentibus in-}

\[\text{hibenda sunt securiora, de hiis primo dicemus. quibus enim convenit corrumpere conceptionem illis erit melius prohibere}

\[\text{(Drabkin & Drabkin 1951, p. 28).}\]

\[\text{Muscio, Gynaecia, 57. Oportet nos rebus aborsoriis uti? apud quosdam non oportet. medicina enim quoscumque natura coeperit, sanare debet, non interime. ali volo volunt uti aborsorius, sed nec si cupiant quae sunt adulterae neque propter lucra, sed si condylomata vel aliqua impediemta in orificio matricis mulier habebat et sic conceptio, melius est aborsorius exterminare quod conceptum est, quam cum dies partus venerit, cum exitus inanti denegatur, periculum mulieris quae parturit ingingat (Rose 1882, p. 20): \’57. E opportuno che si usino preparati abortivi? Alcuni ritengono non opportuno: la medicina, infatti, in qualsiasi modo la natura abbia concepto, deve curare non sopprimere. Altri, però, vogliono che siano usati i mezzi abortivi, ma non per assecondare i desideri delle adultere, né per bramosia di guadagno, ma solo se la donna sia rimasta gravida, pur avendo condilomi od altri impedimenti all’orificio dell’utero; è meglio (allora) allontanare con abortivi il prodotto del concepimento, poiché qualora venisse il giorno del parto, vi sarebbe pericolo di morte anche per la madre, insieme all’esito infantu del bambino (Radicchi 1970, p. 63).}\]

\[\text{Hirschfeld 1928, p. 357.}\]

\[\text{Three of the texts quoted below were published by Hirschfeld; the fourth text (the Copenhagen manuscript) was first published by Laux (Laux 1930, p. 421). Hirschfeld quotes five early medieval manuscripts with approximately the same text (Hirschfeld 1928, section 3.57), but only three of his manuscripts contain the Oath’s passage on abortion. The passage is missing in the fragmentary Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium, MS 1342-50, fol. 1v-3r (late 11th or early 12th century; German?), and Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, Codex N.1502 (V.3.9), fol. 1r (13th century).}\]

\[\text{Stoll 1992, pp. 64, Hirschfeld 1928, p. 369. Stoll translates as follows: ‘Er soll auch kein tödlich wirkendes Mittel verabreichen noch sich von Frauen überreden lassen, ein fruchtabtreibendes Medikament zu geben; er soll auch keinen Rat in dieser Hinsicht erteilen, sondern rein und heilig bleiben’ (Stoll 1992, p. 65). MacKinney translates: ‘Do not allow women to persuade you to give abortives, and do not be a part to any such counsel, but keep yourself immaculate and sacred’ (MacKinney 1952, p. 19).}\]

\[\text{On the manuscript, cf. Beccaria 1956, pp. 193-197 and Stoll 1992, pp. 13-16. The Lorscher Arzneibuch (c. 795) is a medical handbook that contains texts which may have been used for teaching purposes plus a large recipe book, which suggests that (part of) the Hippocratic Oath was taught in the medical curriculum in Lorsch.}\]

\[\text{Hirschfeld 1928, p. 369; a comma between terris and sed in Hirschfeld’s text was removed. On the manuscript, cf. Bec-}

\[\text{caria 1956, pp. 372-381.}\]

As the suggestions added between angled brackets show, the text in the *Codex Sangallensis 751* is corrupt. The ‘mistakes’, especially in terris sed > interesse, seem to be a indication of (syllable for syllable) dictation.
‘Neither to give a deadly medicine, nor be persuaded by women to give an abortifacient (or: ‘nor to give an abortifacient to women because of their passions’), nor be concerned with such advice, but to remain pure and holy’.

Gamle Kongelige Samling 1653, Copenhagen, Kongelige Bibliotek, fol. 72r-76v (eleventh century; Italy?)
Non etiam dandum medicamentum mortale. Nec a mulieribus persuasus abortivum dandum neque interesse tali consilio, sed inmaculate et sancte perseverare.  
‘Neither to give a deadly medicine. Nor to be persuaded by women to give an abortifacient, nor be concerned with such advice, but to remain pure and holy’.

Codex Turicens C. 128/32, Zürich, Zentralbibliothek, fol. 103v-104r (eleventh century)
Caveat ne alicui mortale medicamen inferat neque mulieribus unquam abortiri debeat, propinet neque intersit tali consilio, sed inmaculate et sancte fidei custos ac sedulus perseverator.  
‘He must beware that he does not administer to anyone a deadly medicine, nor should he ever be obliged by women to perform an abortion, [nor] should he supply a drink [an oral medicine], nor be concerned with such advice, but he should be pure and holy, a guardian of and staunch persister in the faith’.

In all four versions the ‘original’ order of the Oath’s passages on lethal drugs and abortion was rearranged. The passage on ‘supplying a deadly medicine’ (the so-called ‘euthanasia’ passage) is now immediately followed by the passage on abortion instead of the promise not to give advice (on euthanasia), so that neque interesse tali consilio and sed inmaculate et sancte perseverare now refer to giving deadly medicines and to giving abortifacients.25 The Lorscher Arzneibuch, the Codex Sangallensis 751, and the Copenhagen manuscript all shortened the Hippocratic pledge to uphold medical standards of conduct (‘and in a pure and holy way I will guard my life and my técnica / art’) to sed inmaculate et sancte perseverare, ‘but to remain pure and holy’; the Codex Turicens adds a pledge to also uphold the faith. The textual reorganization in these early medieval Latin versions of the Oath’s passage on abortion suggests that an abortivum, ‘abortifacient’, was also considered a ‘deadly medicine’ or poison. The classification of abortifacients as potentially lethal poisons is exactly why Roman law and most Old Germanic laws punish supplying poisons and abortifacients - to be more specific, these secular laws punish endangering another person’s life.26

Whereas the Greek text of the Oath - when taken literally - only condemns ‘destructive pessaries’, the late antique and early medieval references to and citations of the Oath’s passage on abortion prohibit all methods of abortion. None of the late antique or early medieval Latin texts discussed above, including the translations of Soranus, mention the πεσσάς φθόριος, nor do they give us any information on why the ‘destructive pessary’ was omitted in the Latin texts on the Oath. It seems as if the πεσσάς φθόριος was silently edited out with the text’s transition into Latin - note that it is already missing in the earliest Latin text on the Oath by Scribonius Largus.27 Perhaps pessaries were considered unorthodox, and not (or hardly) used for medical purposes in the Latin West.28 Or perhaps the Hippocratic Oath reached the Latin West through a Greek textual tradition that did not mention pessaries. Or maybe the Latin text was deliberately disambiguated so it was clear that all methods of abortion were condemned. This tallies with the use of Latin terms that can denote any method of abortion:

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24 Hirschfeld 1928, p. 369. The manuscript is not mentioned in Beccaria 1956.
25 Cf. note 3 for the ‘original’ order.
26 The Lex Cornelia de Sicaris et Veneficis (LCSV), an ancient Roman law on poisoning (81 BC), was known in the early medieval Latin West through the Breviarium Alarici or Lex Romana Visigothorum, a code of Roman law compiled for the Roman subjects of the Visigothic king in 506. Most Old Germanic laws have laws on poisoning that punish the supplier, cf. Elsakkers, Reading Between the Lines, chapter 1 below, Niederhellmann 1983 and Elsakkers 2003.
27 Scribonius Largus’s text does not seem to have been written under influence of early Christianity, see also: Kudlien 1970, p. 95. Riddle 1992, p. 8, calls Scribonius’s text a ‘misreading’ of the Oath; it is, however, probably simply just another interpretation of the Oath.
28 Very few recipes for pessaries are mentioned in the late antique and early medieval recipe books discussed in Elsakkers, Proicit, Purgat et Sanat, unpublished. Here, too, the pessary seems to have been edited out. See also: Elsakkers, Reading Between the Lines, forthcoming, chapter 4, ‘Methods of abortion; pessaries, suppositories and infusions’.
Abortivum, aborsorium, aborsorius, abortire and medicamen, medicamentum - although it must be conceded that abortivum and medicamen(tum) are usually primarily associated with oral abortifacients. The early Latin texts on the Oath’s passage on abortion do not consider it ethical for medical practitioners to be involved in abortion practices; doctors should not supply abortifacients, help a woman get an abortion or give her advice on the subject. Barring exceptions. In the passage quoted above Soranus implies that there was a ‘strict’ and a ‘lenient’ standpoint on abortion; adherents of the latter viewpoint argue that abortions are sometimes permissible. Early medieval secular law, the teachings of the Church fathers and the early medieval penitentials show us that the loopholes the ‘lenient’ viewpoint offers can be stretched, if necessary. Soranus was evidently a caring and pragmatic physician. He knew that abortion was committed, and, although he considers contraception preferable to abortion, he tried to give recipes for abortion that are relatively ‘safe’. In fact, Soranus gives advice on abortion and abortifacients despite the Oath’s warning not to give advice on deadly poisons. Soranus condones abortion if pregnancy presents a danger or threat to a woman’s health, and Priscianus notes that the age of the pregnant woman can also present difficulties. This brings us back to the translations of the Greek text quoted at the beginning. I said above that the modern translations seem to focus on the ‘destruction of the fetus’. I would argue that the ‘original’ Greek Oath also, perhaps mainly, focuses on the mother’s life and health, and that its prohibition of a πεσσόν φθόριος, a dangerous, often deadly, method of abortion, underscores this, because it implicitly forbids suicide. The Latin texts quoted above do the same by linking abortifacients and deadly poisons. The Oath is concerned with preservation of life; ‘whose life’ and ‘whose life comes first’ is where opinions differ. The interpretation of the Oath seems to have always been a point of discussion, and to this day there are still pro-lifers (who are concerned with the legal protection of the fetus and its right to live) and pro-choice (who advocate a woman’s right to control her own body and to decide whether or not to induce an abortion). The former focus on the fetus’s life, and the latter focus on the (mental) health of the pregnant woman.

In the past most of the discussions of the Hippocratic Oath’s passage on abortion were concerned with the interpretation of the Greek text, especially the words πεσσόν φθόριος. This brief look at a few late antique and early medieval Latin texts on the Oath shows us that the much disputed Greek text πεσσόν φθόριος was omitted in the late antique and early medieval Latin texts. The Latin texts quoted above advocate a general prohibition of abortion, but the translations of Soranus’s Gynaecia indicate that there were ‘strict’ and ‘lenient’ views on abortion. How widely the translations of Soranus’s Gynaecia and these versions of the Oath were known in the early medieval West, whether the Oath was taught or sworn, can not be determined without more research. It is quite possible that there are more early medieval versions of (part of) the Oath hidden away in as yet unedited manuscripts.

29 The Lorscher Arzneibuch, the Codex Sangallensis and the Copenhagen manuscript, Priscianus and Muscio use the word abortivum ‘abortifacient’, or aborsorius, -ium, ‘abortive’, Caelius Aurelianus uses the words medicamen and medicamentum, ‘medicine’, and the Codex Turicens uses the verb abortire, ‘to abort’. 30 The early medieval penitentials and the Old Germanic laws often demand a much lighter punishment for early term abortion than for late term abortion, and the penitentials are often lenient towards poor women. Most of the Latin Church Fathers also consider early term abortion to be a less serious sin than late term abortion.
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