



## Landmarks and Legacies

## The evolutionary saga of circumcision from a religious perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Circumcision is the oldest surgical operation known to mankind. It probably originated as a less radical form of genital mutilation inflicted on prisoners of war. Over time it was adopted by the Egyptian priesthood and nobility, perhaps inspired by the mythology of Osiris. In turn, circumcision became part of the Jewish and Muslim religious cultures.

In contrast, ancient Greeks valued an intact prepuce, as evident from the nude figures of Renaissance art. In the 19th century, circumcision was touted as a treatment for excessive masturbation, seizures, epilepsy, and paraplegia. Adoption of the procedure by medical science was almost akin to a religious belief. By the mid-20th century, it was widely performed on male infants on the pretext of phimosis when the prepuce was not retractable. In 1949, Gairdner documented that the tight prepuce of infants gradually becomes retractile as childhood progresses. Thus, childhood circumcision solely for non-retractile prepuce is unnecessary, which is the foundation for modern anti-circumcision movements.

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Arguably circumcision, along with skull trephining, is the most ancient surgical procedure [1]. It most likely originated as a modification of penile amputation. In many ancient cultures, the erect penis, a self-evident symbol of reproductive fecundity, also represented agricultural fertility, wealth, and governing power. Royal wands carried by kings were symbols of the erect penis and absolute authority [2].

If the penis were a sign of power, enemies ought not to have it! Vanquishers emasculated their enemies by amputating their penises. According to the wall inscriptions at the Karnak temple, Pharaoh Merneptah (1212 BCE) was estimated to have collected more than 13,240 penises as war trophies [3]. Pharaohs and sultans were thus reassured that their wives and concubines were safe from sexual

misadventures of the defeated soldiers when they were made to work as slaves in royal harems.

Nonetheless, such mutilation must have caused death from bleeding, infection, and urethral stenosis among any of those survivors. Hence, excision of the prepuce was adopted as a less radical punishment and a symbolic humiliation of defeated enemies [4]. This practice continued into the 18th century. For example, the 24-year-old Warren Hastings, who later became the first Governor General of British India, was stripped, sodomized, and publically circumcised when he was defeated by the Mogul army at Kasimbazar in 1756 CE. As the story goes, Hastings said, "I myself was carved" [5].

## 1. Elevation to religious status

At some point of time in Egyptian history, priests adopted circumcision as a religious rite. In the mythological story of Osiris (Fig. 1), Seth,

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**Fig. 1.** Statue of Osiris (center) and Isis (right) displayed at Louvre Museum. Omission of lower half of Osiris's body could be a tactful acknowledgement of genital amputation. (Photo credit to Mr. Guillaume Blanchard, Reproduced from Wikipedia under Creative Commons license).

his brother and enemy, cut the god into 14 parts and threw the pieces into the Nile. Osiris' wife Isis collected the various parts, sewed them together, and embalmed the reconstructed body for proper burial. However, she could not find his penis as it had been eaten by a mythical fish of the Nile, the Medjed. The aggrieved Isis ordered that a separate golden replica be made of her husband's penis.

Priests of the Osiris cult were also expected to emulate the god's sacrifice and offer their own penises as a sign of devotion [6]. Circumcision was a less radical but still a tangible gesture of religious fidelity. A famous bas-relief at the tomb of Ankhmahor at Saqqara depicts a priesthood initiation ceremony, widely believed to be the circumcision of initiates. (However, Ann Macy Roth, an art historian, pointed out that the procedure shown might simply be a ritual shaving of pubic hair [7]). In another Egyptian myth, two minor gods, Shu and Tefnut, rose from the spilled droplets of blood when Ra, the sun god, circumcised himself.

Circumcision, originally a punishment imposed on slaves and enemies, thus became a sign of aristocracy when it became associated with the gods and voluntarily adopted by the priesthood. Herodotus, the Greek historian who visited Egypt circa 450 BCE, recorded the popularity of circumcision among the upper class citizens. "They place cleanliness before comeliness," he said [3]. Circumcision became a prerequisite for nobility and admission to the highest circles of the society.

Pythagoras had to undergo circumcision before he could be allowed to enter the great library of Alexandria [3]. When Elihu Yale, the founder of Yale University, came to India to meet with Mogul rulers, he was asked to get his foreskin removed before he could meet the emperor [4].

Egyptian priests demanded that circumcision be performed before a pharaoh ascended to the throne. However, in defiance of the authority and supremacy of the priesthood, Amenhotep IV (later known as Akhenaten) opposed all priestly rituals including circumcision [2,11,23]. The act was part of a religious revolution during his reign, which probably initiated a reversion of the social status of circumcision. By the time of the Biblical Exodus, it was once again the slaves, rather than the nobility, that were circumcised in Egypt.

## 2. Greek aversion

Contrary to Egyptians, ancient Greeks and Romans considered it indecent to expose the glans [8]. In 168 BCE, the Seleucid King Antiochus IV made circumcision punishable by flogging, crucifixion, or stoning [3]. At the Olympic games, no one cared about the nudity of athletes, but a retracted prepuce with exposed glans was considered scandalous.

According to the ancient Greeks, the foreskin had two parts: the one covering the glans was called "*posthe*," while that beyond the glans was

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