

Letter to the Editors

Earliest historic reference of 'tinnitus' is controversial

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Dear Sirs,

We read with interest Dietrich's historical article questioning the classical interpretation of Papyrus Ebers as describing tinnitus¹ and agree with his suggestion of a first medical mention of tinnitus in Hippocrates' writings. As stressed by Dietrich, non-medical sources are also of interest because of particular emphasis placed on different aspects compared to medical descriptions.

In a survey of early descriptions of tinnitus-like experience in several religious sources, including Vedaic imagery and the Demotic Magical Papyri,² we reviewed an apparent account of tinnitus in the Babylonian Talmud (Gitin 56B). It relates the punishment inflicted upon Titus after he destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem.

'A gnat entered his nostril and pecked at his brain for seven years. One day Titus was passing by a blacksmith. He heard the noise of the sledgehammer and the gnat became silent. Titus thus said: "Here is the remedy". Every day he brought a blacksmith to bang in his presence. [...] For thirty days this worked fine but then the gnat became accustomed [to the banging] and it resumed pecking.'

No trace of this can be found in Roman historical sources. In this Talmudic report, tinnitus seems to be assimilated with the buzzing of a gnat. Its aetiology is metaphorically attributed to a literal upper airway infection, but its mechanism primarily involves the brain. The Aramaic word מורח and its Hebrew equivalent are classically translated as 'his brain'. Although Talmudic medical knowledge of the brain seems anachronistic, it asserts this organ as the locus of information higher processing. The report goes on to describe empirical management of tinnitus with an ancient version of sound therapy that is strikingly reminiscent of current masking approaches. It interprets the effect as silencing, consistently with gating mechanisms. The report also mentions treatment failure by habituation following the

initial success. Further in the same section, it is said that 'when Titus died, they pierced his skull and found an animal the size of a dove'. The ensuing discussion confronts this tradition with other similar alleged findings. Again, Roman historians say nothing about this. Strong taboos against defilement of the dead prevented the practice of human dissection in Rome. As for Jewish tradition, autopsy was not allowed until the 18th century, when it became accepted upon biblical precedent. To Talmudists, major sources for human knowledge were therefore notions from the observation of casualties of battle and serious accidents. Drawing on the weight and size data provided in the Talmud for the mass found in Titus's skull, Katz³ proposed a differential diagnosis including haemangioma, meningioma and acoustic neuroma, which may all manifest with tinnitus.

In the Babylonian Talmud, tinnitus thus appears as Titus's curse, a gnat buzzing in the brain, responding to sound therapy and then habituating, emphasizing contextual and emotional aspects, which have become an important focus in the modern management of tinnitus.

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References

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- 2 Dan B. Titus's tinnitus. *J Hist Neurosci* (in press)
- 3 Katz Y. Ha-im yatush arag et Titus? [Did a mosquito kill Titus?] *Harefuah* 1997;**133**:653-5