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# The Gladiator's Tears: Epiphora From Ancient Rome

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**Abstract:** This article examines the clinical presentation of epiphora in Ancient Rome through the historico-medical analysis of the literary evidence provided by the verses by the poet Juvenal in his *Satire VI*. A gladiator's ophthalmological problem is interpreted as epiphora caused by traumatic injuries to the craniofacial region, compatible with those described in the palaeopathological literature. This analysis also focuses on the history of epiphora in antiquity and its treatment.

**Key Words:** Ancient Rome, epiphora, eye, history of medicine, trauma

(*J Craniofac Surg* 2019;30: 1938–1940)

Epiphora represents a relatively common clinical symptom in which the nasolacrimal duct is obstructed, leading to an unstable tear film due to impaired tear drainage.<sup>1</sup> The condition can present as a symptom in a high number of pathologies and be either congenital or acquired, although a higher frequency is normally seen in people of advanced age.<sup>1</sup> Common etiologies include ocular infections, obstruction of the lacrimal outflow system, rhinitis, cancer, and trauma. Modern clinical literature has shown epiphora to significantly affect patients' quality of life in terms of both eye function and vision quality, with increased negative outcomes in outdoor activities.<sup>2</sup> Current surgical techniques to correct epiphora include both minimally invasive and anastomosing approaches.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, the condition appears to have been first described in the Ebers Papyrus, one of the most famous medical documents from Ancient Egypt<sup>3</sup>: “Another remedy for the removing of an accumulation of water in both eyes, true lapis lazuli, green eye make-up, snn-balm (i.e., snn Balm of Mecca, perhaps identical with the Biblical Balm of Gilead), milk, black eye make-up, excrement of crocodile, roots of the Khate, turn it to a homogenous mass, give it to the lids.”<sup>4</sup> The substances mentioned as medications would hardly have had any healing effect, though. While green eye make-up consisting of malachite (copper oxide) might

have produced certain antibacterial effects, the other materials in the recipe might well have caused noxious outcomes, namely infection of the eye.<sup>3</sup>

A progressive understanding of the nature of epiphora was achieved by the Greek medical school through the research of Hippocrates (460–375 BC), who clearly correlated the condition with old age.<sup>5</sup> In the Roman era, Galen (129–216 AD) was indeed the first to provide an etiological classification of epiphora as caused by a blockage of the nasolacrimal duct, an excessive secretion of tears, or scarring at the nasal canthus.<sup>5</sup> Before Galen, Pliny the Elder (23–79 AD) had described epiphora in his *Natural History*, affirming that it was effectively treated by means of a medicament consisting of the juice and leaves of *Glaucium flavum* (the yellow horn poppy, “glaucion” in Pliny's text).<sup>6,7</sup> If Pliny's words are to be believed, this prescription apparently caused the symptomatology to regress very rapidly. It can be presumed that it was mostly effective against those forms of epiphora caused by infectious processes, which might have been tackled by the anti-inflammatory properties of glaucine, the main alkaloid in *Glaucium flavum*.<sup>8</sup>

With the purpose of better assessing the presence of epiphora in the Roman world and its impact, this article examines classical verses by the Roman poet Juvenal from palaeopathological and historico-medical perspectives.

## METHODS

Juvenal (active in the late 1st and early 2nd century AD) is primarily remembered for his *Satires*, a collection of satirical compositions in which the vices and bad habits of Imperial Roman society were scorned. Since the poet's main focus was the society in which he lived, his work is held as a vivid form of evidence of the customs and practices of ancient Rome. In addition, the detailed and colourful descriptions of the times in which he lived provide researchers with a slice of ancient everyday life otherwise lost through time.<sup>9</sup> This text, despite its satirical bent, is an indispensable source for understanding the social life of the time, as recognised by prominent past historians of ancient Rome such as Jerome Carcopino (1881–1970) in his *La vie quotidienne à Rome à l'apogée de l'Empire* [Daily life in ancient Rome: the people and the city at the height of empire] (1939). In his *Satire VI*, amongst several misogynistic remarks and invectives, Juvenal criticizes women's passion for gladiators, an apparently widespread obsession. His gibe particularly aims at an upper-class woman named Eppia who chooses to leave her family and status for the love of a gladiator called Sergiolus. The poet mercilessly condemns such a choice especially on account of the fact that the gladiator appears to be rather unpleasant in appearance, which ultimately leads Juvenal to remark “*Ferrum est, quod amanti*” (“The sword is what they [women] love”).<sup>10</sup> Because of its caustic misogynistic nature, this passage has so far been studied mainly as a reflection on social behavior in Imperial Rome.

The current investigation is grounded on Juvenal's physical description of Sergiolus, the gladiator, blending historical, linguistic and palaeopathological data as typical in the multidisciplinary assessment of ancient pathologies.<sup>11,12</sup>

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## RESULTS

Sergiolus, the gladiator, is described in a rather crude way:

*Præterea multa in facie deformia; sicut*  
[Moreover many in (his) face deformities; such as]  
*Attritus gales, mediisque in naribus ingens*  
[a scar of the helmet, in the middle of the nose a large]  
*Gibbus, et acre malum semper stillantis ocelli.*  
[hump, and (his) eyes always emitting a bothersome humour]  
(Literal translation)

Moreover, [Sergiolus has] many facial deformities; such as a helmet scar, a large hump on his nose, and eyes continuously oozing an annoying discharge. (vv. 107–109) (Authors' translation)

Three types of deformities can thus be identified in this passage:

- 1) A scar caused by the rubbing of the iron helmet against the soft tissues of the face [i.e. *attritus gales*];
- 2) A voluminous hunch-shaped mass on the nose [i.e., *ingens gibbus in mediis naribus*];
- 3) Eyes incessantly emitting a fluid, which causes some discomfort [i.e. *ocelli stillantis acre malum*].

## DISCUSSION

The *acre malum*, unremittently oozing [*semper stillantis*] from the gladiator's eyes, appears to indicate some form of incessant lacrimation, which has become a constitutional trait for this individual, vaguely suggesting a chronic nature (as *stillantis* is an archaic poetic form of *stillantes*, which agrees with *ocelli* in number, gender, and case: nominative masculine plural). In support of this reading are the other attributes found in the description, namely Sergiolus's scars and a nasal protuberance, which are clearly permanent morphological traits. Therefore it appears reasonable to postulate that Juvenal included only chronic and/or definitive aspects in his portrayal of the gladiator Sergiolus, rather than just an acute (transitory) occurrence of eye disease (eg, an infection such as conjunctivitis).

This leads us to interpret this form of lacrimation in terms of epiphora (permanent rather than transient)—a Greek-derived word already coined in classical times as seen above. Reading the passage in this way, the use of the adjective *acre*, which speaks to the discomfort to the gladiator brought about by this condition, makes sense. The verses do not specify, however, whether this disease caused Sergiolus any substantial disability. It is sensible to assume, though, that any impairment of his vision might have constituted some limitation to his fighting skills, but not enough to have him beaten, considering he was at the time regarded a champion of the arena. Furthermore, the word *ocelli* should be carefully examined: it could mean that the epiphora was bilateral. On the other hand, the plural might well have been used out of stylistic choice. Therefore, the possibility that the condition was unilateral cannot be excluded. Nevertheless, one can be more confident that the diminutive *ocelli* ("small eyes"), in lieu of *oculi*, bears no anatomical correlation, since the expression was widely idiomatic in Latin and can be translated with just "eyes" (cf *Dizionario Latino Olivetti*, sub voce "ocellus").

In spite of the seemingly well-known and effective medicament prescribed by Pliny, no mention of any such treatment is made in Juvenal's verse. As the work's purpose is to mock a woman for her affection for a man, there is no poetic reason for Juvenal to describe treatment for his condition. However, the duration of Sergiolus's condition (*stillantis*) suggests one of the following interpretations:

- a. The gladiator was not able to access decent medical care, which is unlikely since, as he was a famed champion, it would have been in his owner's interest to keep him as physically fit and healthy a warrior as possible<sup>13</sup>;
  - b. This form of treatment was not widespread; however, the scant mentions in the ancient sources do not allow us to firmly establish it in epidemiological terms. One may only speculate that, as the medicament was discussed in Pliny's encyclopaedic work, it may have been rather commonly prescribed;
  - c. By the time Juvenal wrote those verses, medical treatment of epiphora had considerably changed, which again appears unlikely considering the fact that only a few decades separate Pliny's death from Juvenal's lifespan, too short a time for any substantial medical revolution in the ancient world. In addition, the only advancements in the field were Galen's anatomical discoveries, while ophthalmological practice basically remained the same;
  - d. The medicament was ineffective per se, which directly counters Pliny's statement and could only be experimentally demonstrated by retrieving the original formula and the exact components of this remedy. If it was ineffective, this might also explain why no mention of it is to be found in this description (besides poetic and stylistic choices);
  - e. The gladiator's epiphora might not have been of an infectious origin, which would straightforwardly explain why any given medical treatment produced no real healing effect on the patient. Considering hypothesis *e* further, the gladiator's face had scars caused by his helmet—likely a fully closed one similar to that used by special types of gladiators such as *secutores*, *thraeces* or *murmilloes*—which might well reflect traumas incurred during fights in the arena. As far as the nasal protuberance is concerned, it should be interpreted as a mass on the middle of the nose, rather than literally "between the nostrils," since the plural *nares* was clearly used in classical Latin to collectively indicate the "nose" (cf *A Latin Dictionary*, sub voce "naris").
- This mass may have been a natural hump as typical of a prominently aquiline nose, the result of a poorly healed fracture of the nose (of traumatic origin, potentially leading to some exostotic outcome at the level of the nasal bones), or a tumorous growth.
- With particular reference to traumatic lesions in the craniofacial region of known gladiators, anthropological assessment of the osteological remains of gladiators from Ephesus (in modern day Turkey) and from Eboracum (in modern day York, England) has shown widespread evidence of severe trauma at the frontal region of the skull that was inflicted by sharp or puncturing specialized weapons used by gladiators (*gladius*, *sica*, trident) or blunt traumas caused by their own helmets, as is just as in the case of the *attritus gales* referred to by Juvenal.<sup>14,15</sup> Interestingly, current medical literature lists epiphora amongst the likely outcomes of nasal bone trauma.<sup>16</sup> Whether it be neoplastic or traumatic, such deep alterations to craniofacial morphology are likely to have impaired the physiological lacrimal drainage system, ultimately resulting in epiphora.

## CONCLUSION

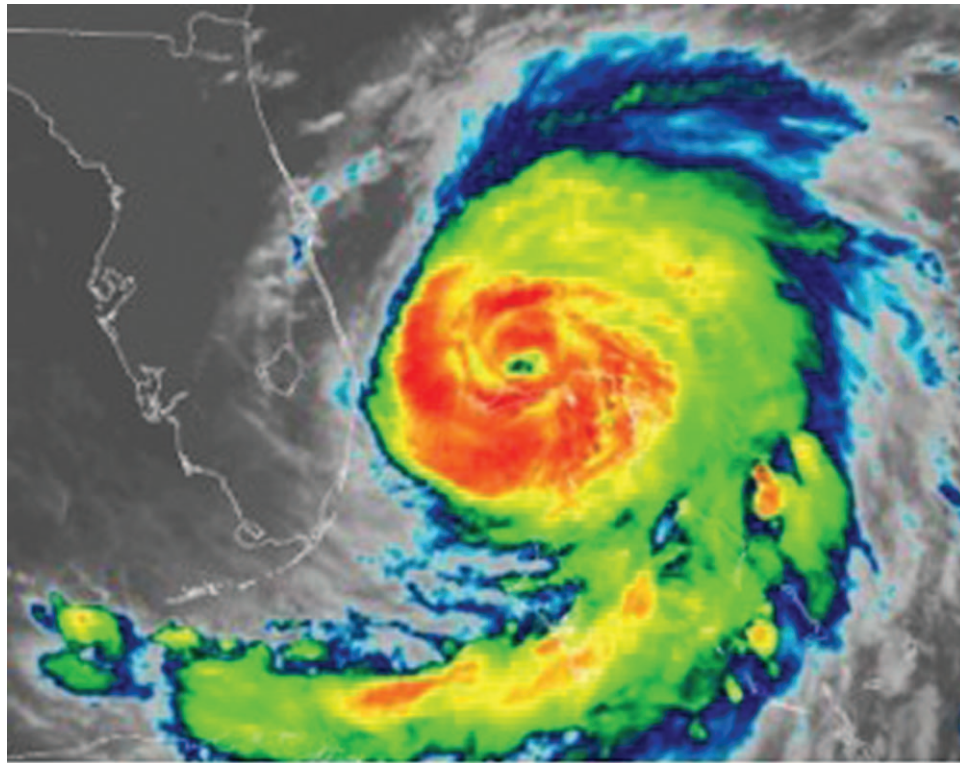
Despite the obvious interpretative limitations represented by the poetic nature of the source and the lack of further details, we propose the case of gladiator Sergiolus as a likely instance of epiphora from Imperial Rome. Other apparently occupationally derived lesions mentioned in the description lead us to postulate that the etiology of this condition might have been traumatic.

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A dragon's head preparing to gulp Florida.