Rönesans Döneminden Bir Tabloda Epilepsi

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ÖZET
Epileptik nöbetler tarihin çok eski çağlarından beri târif edilmektedir. Mısır papirüsleri ve hâlâ da-
ha eski kil tabletler üzerinde epilepsi ve epileptik nöbete ilişkin bildirimler mevcuttur. Hastalığın
değişken ve kimi zaman korkutucu tabiatı nedeniyle san'atçılar, yazarlar ve film yapımcıları da epi-
lepsiye ilgi duymuşlardır. En ünlü epileptik figür ise İtalyan ressam Raphael Santi tarafından resme-
dilmiştir. Bu yazda, Raphael’in ölümü nedeniyle tamamlamadığı son tablosu “The Transfigurati-
on of Christ on Mount Tabor”’daki epileptik anlatımdan bahsedilmiştir. Epilepsi ile ilgili toplum bi-
lincini artırmak için san'atın evrenselliğinin kullanılması amaçlanmıştır.
Anahtar Kelimeler: epilepsi, sanat, Raphael

ABSTRACT
Epilepsy in a Renaissance Painting
Epileptic seizures have been described from the very early ages of man. Reports on epilepsy and
epileptic seizures may be detected on Egyptian papyri and older cuneiform tablets. Artists, writers
and film producers have been interested in epilepsy because of the variable and sometimes scary
nature of the illness. The most famous epileptic figure has been painted by Italian artist Raphael
Santi. The epileptic description in the the last painting of Raphael; “The Transfiguration of Christ
on Mount Tabor” which hasn’t been finished because of the early death of the artist has been
mentioned in this article. It has been aimed to use the universality of art to increase the public
knowledge about epilepsy.
Keywords: epilepsy, art, Raphael

INTRODUCTION
Epileptic seizures have been described and depic-
ted since the very early ages of man. Egyptian papyri
(Masia and Devinsky 2000) and Babylonian cuneiform
tables (Wilson and Reynolds 1990) demonstrate the
first written medical texts on epilepsy. Various seizure
types are contained within these Babylonian tablets of
the Sakikku (meaning “All Diseases”) which are held in
the British Museum, London (Hunt et al. 2007). During
ancient times, epilepsy was widely regarded as an ex-
pression of evil (Gross 1992) or an unnatural mysterious
illness out of this world. It has been mentioned and
described in many novels (Krauss et al. 2000, Wolf
2006) and even movies (Baxendale 2003). Because of
the variability of its clinical manifestations and the
mysterious nature of epilepsy, it was ideal for artistic
interpretations by writers and film directors.
For the same reasons, painters have also been inte-
rested in epilepsy. Epileptic figures may clearly be seen
on votive tablets which have been traditional in Chris-
tianity. However, the most famous “epileptic figure” was
created by the Italian painter; Raphael Santi (Janz 1986).
His last painting; The Transfiguration of Christ on Mount
Tabor (Fig 1a) which was left unfinished because of Rap-
hael’s unexpected early death, has been considered to be
demonstrating an epileptic seizure.
EPILEPSY AND ART

Epileptologists know this painting through William Lennox and his two-volume book *Epilepsy and Related Disorders* (Lennox and Lennox 1960). The painting is divided into two parts. The upper part shows Christ rising to heaven while the lower part (Fig 1b) shows the possessed child that Christ has saved from the spirit (Sirven 2002). The painting is based on a biblical passage:

“...Teacher, I brought my son to you, because he has an evil spirit in him and cannot talk. Whenever the spirit attacks him, it throws him to the ground, and he foams at the mouth, grits his teeth and becomes stiff all over...” (Mark 9:17-18).

Evaluating the lower part of the painting; we see the father in green clothes which probably symbolizes hope, holding the boy showing that he cannot stand still by himself.

The Gospel and the narration of the painting point to an epileptic seizure. But from the medical point of view it’s not easy to semiotically classify this event. We see the tonic posturing of the right arm with the dystonic posturing of the left hand. The boy looks unresponsive with his eyes deviated above and divergent. Even though it has been described as a generalized tonic-clonic seizure formerly (Janz 1986) this might be a tonic-dialeptic seizure as well. The divergence of the eyes is not a symptom which we specifically expect in a seizure. We could expect the eyes to be deviated to the right as part of a versive seizure, considering the right tonic part of the seizure. One of the most important reasons to describe this painting as a seizure is its religious history. Even though the term epilepsy has not been used in the bible, the details of the story are consistent with an epileptic seizure (deToledo et al. 1996).

DISCUSSION

We conclude that the painting itself might not have been considered as an epileptic seizure without the gospel. But the description of the event combined with the visual scene strengthens the “diagnosis” of an epileptic seizure. Considering that this is not a me-
dical drawing but an art painting, we believe that the uncertainty in the diagnosis may be attributed to the background of the painter.

CONCLUSION
We support the idea that public knowledge and attention of epilepsy may be augmented via this precious art article.

REFERENCES