



GREEK AND ROMAN MEDICINE

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INTRODUCTION

- Hippocrates, the “father” of medicine?
- The four humours and the medical tradition
- Therapeutics anchored in **various** healing practices
- Medical practitioners
- Medicine as a discipline?
- Medicine as literature

PLAN

- **1. Greek medicine:**
 - Early evidence of medical practice
 - Hippocrates
 - Medicine and philosophy
 - Galen and the Hippocratic legacy
 - Alternative medical traditions and practices
- **2. Roman medicine:**
 - Traditional (household) Roman medicine
 - Adopting the Greek “art of healing” (*technè iatrikè*)
 - Galen: a Greek physician in Rome
 - Roman overachievers: Celsus, Soranus, Caelius Aurelianus
- **3. The posterity of Greek and Roman medicine**



1. 1. Early evidence of medical practice:

- Palaeopathology
- Archaeology
- Archaeobotany
- Bioarchaeology
- Early Greek texts: Homer's *Iliad*

1. 2. Hippocrates

- An elusive historical figure
- Building on earlier knowledge?
- Two rival schools: Cos and Cnidus
- Hippocrates and Asclepius
- The 'Hippocratic Collection' : date and authorship problems
- Key topics: clinical cases, epilepsy, medical deontology, women's diseases
- Key texts: Aphorisms, Sacred Disease, Epidemics I-VII, the Oath, Prognostic

HIPPOCRATIC WRITINGS





1. 3. Medicine and philosophy

- Early Greek “philosophy” & medicine
- Plato: our most reliable evidence of Hippocrates’ fame
- Plato on medical matters: *Timaeus*
- Medicine and philosophy: a controversial link
- Overlap between natural philosophy and medicine (4 elements & qualities)
- Aristotle: developing natural philosophy topics + framing future physicians’ work

1. 4. Galen and the Hippocratic legacy

- Galen of Pergamum (129-216?): exceptional aptitudes, exceptional career
- Physician to the emperors Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, Septimius Severus, and (perhaps) Caracalla
- A medical project unique in the history of science: cover all the topics and all the aspects of medicine
- Commenting on Hippocrates and systematizing the Hippocratic legacy
- Galen, a major prose writer in the Roman Empire
- Unparalleled fame and posterity



2.1 Traditional Roman medicine

- Roman medical practice: house-based (no medical professionals)
- Knowledge transmission in the domestic context
- Plants, herbs – and incantations
- Medical properties/magic
- Sources: Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, Celsus, Scribonius Largus...

About women and menstruation:

As to the menstrual discharge itself, a thing that in other respects, as already stated on a more appropriate occasion, is productive of the most monstrous effects, there are some ravings about it of a most dreadful and unutterable nature. Of these particulars, however, I do not feel so much shocked at mentioning the following. If the menstrual discharge coincides with an eclipse of the moon or sun, the evils resulting from it are irremediable; and no less so, when it happens while the moon is in conjunction with the sun; the congress with a woman at such a period being noxious, and attended with fatal effects to the man. At this period also, the lustre of purple is tarnished by the touch of a woman; so much more baneful is her influence at this time than at any other.

Pliny the Elder, *Nat. hist.* 28.23



2.2. Adopting the Greek “art of healing” (*technè iatrikè*)

- Cult of Asclepius imported following “plague” in 293 BC
- Rome conquers Greece (Pydna 168 BC)
- Influx of Greek immigrants/slaves
- Greek arts progressively adopted/assimilated by the Romans
- Greek medicine in particular becomes (relatively) popular
- Imperial Rome: Greek physicians attached to the Palace & Roman elite
- Check out Vivian Nutton, *Ancient Medicine* ch. 11, ‘Rome and the transplantation of Greek Medicine’

2.3. Galen: a Greek physician in Rome

- Galen makes his reputation early on as a remarkable physician in Pergamum, upon returning from Alexandria
- Galen moves to Rome following unrest in Pergamum
- His book ***On prognosis*** recalls his outstanding deeds at wealthy patients' bedsides in Rome
- Becomes physician to Marcus Aurelius
- Galen's *Oeuvre* & the Roman empire: places and people, foodstuffs, wines, remedies, books, and the flaws of imperial rule (famines, crime, Commodus...)
- Makes anatomy fashionable in Rome
- Galen's aim: to be the Trajan of medicine, repairing old roads and opening new ones (***Method of Healing*** IX, 9)
- Key medical topics in Galen: theory & experience, anatomy, surgery, pharmacology





The new Galen: De indolentia (avoiding distress)

- Found in a manuscript in Greece by a student (Thessaloniki, Vlatades monastery)
- A letter
- A unique testimony on the reign of Commodus, the plague, late Antonine Rome (libraries, buildings, storage...)
- Galen's own thoughts, works, possessions
- Galen's self-portrait
- Galen's ideas about resilience (coping with loss, with anxiety and fear)
- Translated by Vivian Nutton as part of Peter Singer's volume, *Galen. Psychological Writings*, 2013
- Collection of papers reviewing the significance of the text [here](#)

Galen, *Avoiding distress*, 4-6 (p. 78-79 in Galen, *Psychological Writings* 2013)

“You were amazed that I was seen bearing without distress the in the fire not so much of my silver, gold, silver plate and the many loan documents that were deposited there, as that of a further mass of things stored there, namely, a huge quality of drugs of all sorts, both simple and compound, and instruments of every kind. Some, valuable for medical purposes, I said I had lost but still hoped to replace, but that other instruments I had invented myself, making models out of wax before handing them over to the bronze-smiths, these I cannot replace without a great deal of time and effort. Likewise books, both those copies of the writings of ancient authors corrected by my own hand and my own compositions, as well as so-called antidotes, of which you say that you know that I had a substantial collection, notably some eighty pounds of the famous theriac, and more cinnamon that can be found in all the retail shops put together, just as I had in my possession a great store of drugs that are otherwise rare.”

2.4. Roman overachievers: Celsus, Soranus, Caelius Aurelianus

- Roman medicine & Greek framework (s)
- **Celsus** (1st c. AD): a non-specialist writing on medicine in Latin
- Pliny the Elder
- **Soranus** of Ephesus: a 2nd c. AD 'Methodist' physician hailed by Galen: *Gynaecology* in 4 books (**obstetrics**)

Soranus wrote in Greek but had a lasting influence in the Roman world:

- **Caelius Aurelianus** (5th c. AD): writes in Latin in North Africa – another 'methodist'





Alternative medical traditions

- Alternative medical practices equally popular and strong everywhere in the Empire (East and West) and across the Mediterranean
- Role of Egypt in blending eastern and western traditions (Pamphilus)
- Healing cults (Asclepius)
- Magic
- Astro-medicine
- Ancient pharmacology: at the crossroads of medicine, magic, astrology, alchemy
- "high" medicine accepting of other traditions (see Galen, late antique physicians like Alexander of Tralles)

3. The posterity of Greek and Roman medicine

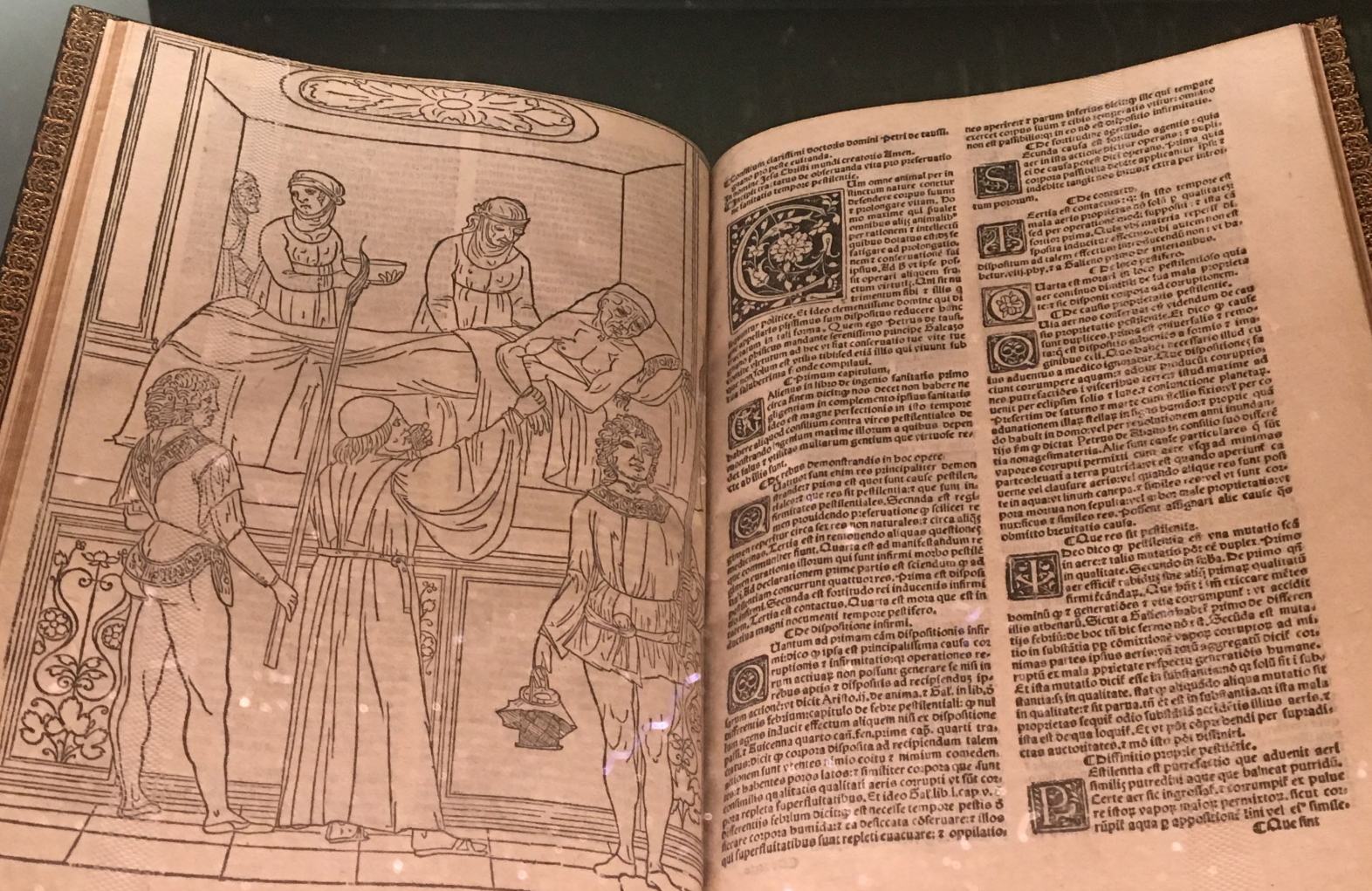
- ‘Hippocrates in a world of pagans and Christians’ (Temkin)
- Late antique compilers, or the ‘refrigerators of antiquity’ (Nutton)? Oribasius, Aetius of Amida, Paul of Aegina
- Pivotal role of Alexandria
- Focus on practical matters: collections of remedies & herbals, handbooks, commentaries, ...
- Translation into Eastern languages (and, for Greek texts, into Latin): Syriac, Arabic



New world, old texts

- Renaissance rediscovery of texts in the form of Greek and Latin manuscripts, leading to a considerable editorial enterprise
- Encyclopaedism
- Modern physicians engaging with ancient medicine in a variety of ways
- Challenges of the **new world**, colonial perspective: role of ancient texts and frameworks? How to integrate different frameworks and a global materia medica?
- Galenic medicine stays strong until late 19th c

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Further reading...

- M. D. Grmek, *Diseases in the ancient Greek World*, John Hopkins University Press, 1989 (ch. 1)
- R. J. Hankinson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Galen*, 2008
- J. Jouanna, *Hippocrates*, 1999 (several reprints)
- **R. Lane Fox, *The Invention of Medicine*, 2020**
- **V. Nutton, *Galen. A Thinking Doctor in Imperial Rome*, 2020**
- V. Nutton, *Ancient Medicine* 2013 (2nd edition)
- V. Nutton, chapters 1-3 in L. Conrad *et alii* (eds), *The Western Medical Tradition*, 1995
- C. Petit (ed.), *Revisiting Medical Humanism in Renaissance Europe*, 2021 ([open access](#))
- C. Petit (ed.), *Galen's peri alupias (De indolentia) in Context. A tale of resilience*, Brill, 2018 ([open access](#))
- C. Roberts et al., 'Health and Disease in Greece. Past, Present and Future' in H. King (ed.), *Health in Antiquity*, 2005, 32-58
- O. Temkin, 1973. *Galenism. Rise and Decline of a Medical Philosophy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press

...or listening:

- *In Our Time* : GALEN (Melvyn Bragg with Vivian Nutton, Helen King & Caroline Petit)
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03c4dys>
- *In Our Time* : HIPPOCRATES (the Oath)
- (Melvyn Bragg with Vivian Nutton, Helen King and Peter Pormann)
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b014gdqq>
- Questions? Feel free to contact me at C.C.L.Petit@warwick.ac.uk
- See my blog <https://www.medicineancientandmodern.com/>