

New light on ancient medicine

PROFESSOR VIVIAN NUTTON FBA

FEW AREAS OF THE study of Classical Antiquity have changed so much or so rapidly over the last 30 years. That was the message of a panel discussion held at the British Academy on 17 May 2011. As Professor Helen King (The Open University) explained, what had once been confined to the elucidation of a handful of Greek texts by Hippocrates and, occasionally, Galen had been replaced by wide-ranging investigations across a diversity of languages and cultures. Not only had scholars drawn on ideas coming from anthropology and elsewhere in history, but an abundance of new discoveries had allowed new insights into the medical marketplace of Antiquity.

Patients, and doctors, could choose between a variety of sources of cure, ranging from the gods to wise women. There were itinerant healers, but also, as the recently excavated House of the Surgeon at Rimini shows, wealthy bourgeois practitioners living in large stylish houses. There was co-operation, not confrontation, between religious and secular approaches to therapy. Doctors accepted the validity of dream cures, gave generously to temples, and even held religious priesthoods.

Medicine in the Roman world has also been rescued from the prejudices that considered it inferior to that of earlier Greeks, or conversely praised its preference for simple practical remedies over wordy theoretical constructs. Both sides had arguably created rhetorical images of 'their' medicine as a way of responding to the colonial situation that followed upon

the Romans' take-over of the Greek world from the 2nd century BC onwards.

This interaction between medical cultures was nicely demonstrated in the Stanway hoard. Buried near Colchester around the time of the successful Roman invasion of Britain in AD 43, it contained surgical instruments, a board game and what were presumed to be a set of divining rods. Their owner was wealthy, but to call him a Druid healer was a simplistic solution to some complex questions of identity.

Evidence from papyri

The new sources of evidence are not confined to archaeological material, or to inscriptions recording the lives (and sometimes careers) of ancient practitioners. Dr David Leith (University of Cambridge) introduced some of the new papyrus finds that had earlier in the day been the subject of an international workshop jointly sponsored by the British Academy and the Wellcome Trust to assist in the editing of roughly 60 Greek papyri from the city of Oxyrhynchus in Roman Egypt.

His first example was a fragment of a pharmacological treatise containing a recipe by Heras of Cappadocia. Heras, a Greek, wrote his *Narthen (Recipe Box)* in Rome around 20 BC. The new papyrus shows how quickly and how far knowledge of his book had spread within two or three decades, more than a century before Galen excerpted this and other recipes by Heras to use in his own drug books.

The Hippocratic Oath

Papyri from Oxyrhynchus also contribute to a re-evaluation of the most famous medical document from Antiquity, the *Hippocratic Oath*. One of them, deliberately cut out of a bigger text, reiterated that the *Oath* should be taken at the very beginning of a medical education. In another, written around AD 400, the copyist modified the language of the *Oath* to make it more intelligible.

The *Oath* was a living document, and as such open to change. A recent find in a much later medieval Greek manuscript in Milan offers an interesting variant. In place of the

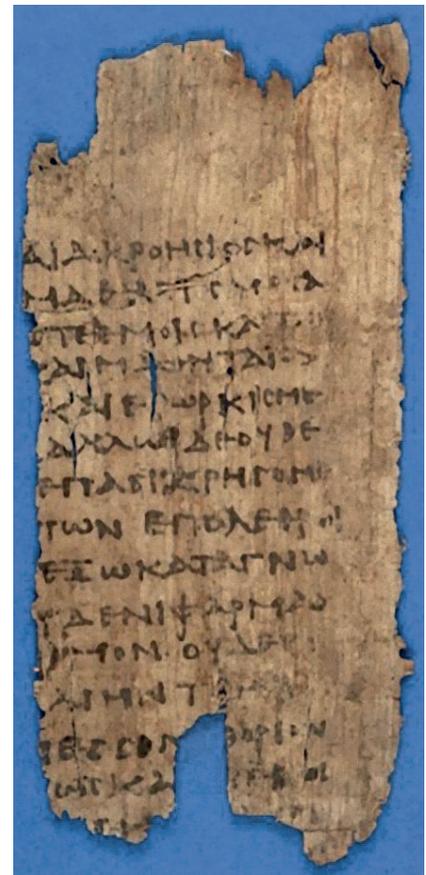


Figure 1. A papyrus fragment of the Hippocratic Oath from Roman Egypt. Photo: © the Wellcome Library.

troublesome sentence forbidding all types of surgery, except by specialists, someone in Antiquity substituted a vow that the doctor would not allow his aides or any other practitioners to administer a poison or an abortive pessary. This manuscript also adds a new sentence to another early ethical text, the *Law*. Its praise of a doctor's competence, 'a good treasure and a proud possession', is a positive counterpart to the previous (known) sentence condemning incompetence. And its presence in an early Arabic translation, made centuries before our earliest manuscripts were written, confirms that this sentence is likely to have been in the original Greek.

But not every doctor in Antiquity viewed the ethical prescriptions in the *Oath* with the same respect as Scribonius Largus, a doctor who came to Britain with the invading forces in AD 43. The preface to his *Drug recipes* is a meditation on the *Oath* in Roman terms. By contrast, the surviving fragments of a commentary on the *Oath* ascribed to Galen (129-216) concentrate on its cultural and historical context, and rely for ethical guidance more on later stories about the great Hippocrates.

New treatises

This commentary, preserved in Arabic, is only one of the many new treatises that have come to light over the last decades. I calculate that, on average, at least 40 pages of new material had been published each year since the 1970s, some in the form of quotations preserved in later authors, but more often as complete treatises, sometimes several books long. Some were entirely new, others had been badly or partially published in the Renaissance from poor manuscripts and then forgotten.

Although most of the new Latin treatises come from Late Antiquity, they include a chapter on bladderstone from the *On medicine* of Cornelius Celsus, the most stylish of all Latin medical writers who lived around AD 40. Greek authors from Late Antiquity have also been rediscovered, like Paul of Nicaea, showing not only the continuation of some sound practical therapies, but also the way in which the great range of medical ideas visible in the time of Celsus shrank,

or was shrinking, into a dogmatic Galenism.

Galen

Galen is the greatest beneficiary of the new discoveries, along with the many earlier authors he cites, or others whose works were believed to be his. One such author, a Greek contemporary, praised the healing powers of the centaur to cure everything from collywobbles and headache to rabies and the plague.

hard to interpret. In *Medical terminology*, Galen advocated an unusual course of action – reading Aristophanes to find out the everyday meaning of words in 5th-century Greece, for a competitive comic writer had to use ordinary language to ensure that his audience got the point of his jokes.

Hippocrates was one of the ancient authors whose ideas Galen thought essential knowledge for every practitioner. In *Examining the physician*, Galen provided the would-



Figure 2. A medieval manuscript of the Latin Galen. Photo: © the Biblioteca Malatestiana, Cesena.

Galen himself stood at the end of a long tradition of Hippocratic exegesis that he had inherited from his teachers. It required both medical and philological expertise, for the dark aphorisms of Hippocrates were often

be patient with a questionnaire to present to the doctor before he was allowed to perform any diagnosis. It reveals much about the desired competence of a Roman physician or surgeon, but even more about the

prospective patient, who not only is expected to know the answers but also has the time to interview several candidates before making his choice. The implication of the treatise is also that it would be safer and quicker to choose Galen.

'Avoiding distress'

Many of these new discoveries, like Galen's long and vivid description of a fight between a snake and a weasel quoted by an Arabic zoologist, are not preserved in their original Greek, but in medieval translations into Arabic, Latin or Hebrew, with all the difficulties that brings. But there are exceptions. In 2005 a French research student found in a neglected volume in Thessalonica a fragment of medical philosophy, the previously lost portions of three works by Galen that form the foundation for all modern studies of his life and works, and another tract, *Avoiding distress*, known previously only from a few isolated references. M. Pietrobelli and his supervisor, Mme Boudon-Millot, have now published all the new texts with commendable speed and accuracy.

Avoiding distress was written by Galen in AD 193 shortly after the death of the emperor Commodus, whose reign, he declares, was the worst in recorded history. In it he reveals what it was like to live under a tyrant, but also the consequences of the disastrous fire in Rome the previous year. He lost books, gold, silver, drugs, instruments and legal documents when the public storehouse went up in flames. He, and others, paid higher rent for depositing their valuables in a supposedly fire-proof building protected by the imperial guard, for many state archives were also kept there. His own losses were substantial, and almost irreplaceable, for many of the originals from which he had taken a copy had also perished when the fire consumed

the imperial libraries on the Palatine.

We are given only a tiny glimpse of these vanished riches. Autograph copies by famous authors, the complete works of Aristotle and Theophrastus, some of which had escaped the notice of earlier cataloguers, the famous editions of Homer by Aristarchus, and masterpieces of calligraphy that had belonged to Cicero's friend Atticus and to other collectors. All these were now gone for ever. Although Galen's friends could supply him with replacements for some of his own books from copies he had sent them for their own use or for deposit in public libraries, much he could never recover. He was extremely unlucky: had the fire broken out only a few weeks later, he would have had copies despatched to his villa in Campania. Nonetheless, so he claims, he refused to be distressed. The example of his father, who despised fame and fortune, and a few lines from a play by Euripides had taught him that, if one always prepared for the worst, even the bad could be tolerated.

New perceptions of old traditions

This abundance of new material, along with the knowledge that there is more still in the pipe-line, has fundamentally changed perceptions of medicine in the ancient world. It has allowed new and wider questions to be asked about the place of healing in ancient society, not least in centuries for which previously there had been little evidence. We are now much better informed about the ways in which Greek medicine developed in the Hellenistic world as it spread from the Aegean basin both westward to Italy and eastward to the borders of India. The old picture of a relatively static tradition, based (with rare exceptions) on the famous theory of the four humours, has been replaced

by the dynamism of the competitive market, in which claims to anatomical knowledge vied with astrological expertise, and where a patient might choose to consult a woman healer or a god, alongside or instead of a Hippocrates or a Galen.

Of wider significance for classical studies is the opportunity provided by the new evidence to study the interaction of a variety of healing cultures across the Greek and particularly Roman worlds. This is neatly illustrated by a brief history of medicine found in a Latin manuscript copied by three scribes in Bologna around 1350, but clearly depending on sources that go back to Late Antiquity, if not earlier. According to the author, it was Noah who awarded separate medical specialties to the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Syrians and the Indians. But some were not satisfied with what they had received. Asclepius, accompanied by 40 Macedonian sages, travelled East to the Garden of Eden to find the tree of knowledge. As he reached out to touch it, he and his companions were struck down by the sword of the guardian angel. Consequently medicine remained hidden for almost 630 years until it was restored by Hippocrates of Cos, the first in a series of great doctors culminating in Galen of Cappadocia.

This unusual text combines Greek and Hebrew traditions, fact and fiction, legend and scholarship. It is a reminder that ancient medicine did not end with the fall of Rome, or of Byzantium for that matter, but long continued to flourish, and indeed still continues to do so in the Muslim world today. This allows scholars to hope that, at least for a while yet, many more medical writings from Classical Antiquity will be discovered, which in their turn will throw yet further light on the classical past of medicine.

Vivian Nutton is Emeritus Professor of the History of Medicine at University College London, and a Fellow of the British Academy. His annotated translation of Galen's *Avoiding distress* is published this year.

Audio recordings of the presentations by Dr Leith and Professor Nutton can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/events/2011/NewLightonAncientMedicine.cfm
