
La médecine dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine by Helen King and
Véronique Dasen

Lausanne: Éditions BHMS, 2008. Pp. xii + 130. ISBN 978–2–9700536–
6–8. Paper € 18.66

Reviewed by
Janet Downie
Princeton University
jdownie@princeton.edu

In the preface to his monumental edition of the Hippocratic Corpus, the 19th-century philologist and physician Émile Littré compared his task as translator to that of a doctor engaged in bedside consultation: ‘il a fallu souvent essayer un diagnostic rétrospectif, qui n’est pas entouré de moindres obscurités que le diagnostic au lit du malade’ [1839–1861]. It was, of course, Littré’s explicit intention that his work enrich the medical practice of his own time. But by evoking the complexities of philological ‘diagnosis’, Littré registers his awareness of the vast conceptual distance that separated him and his contemporaries from Greco-Roman culture. His work marks a turning point in the study of ancient medicine: long read by doctors as the work of a fellow professional, the Hippocratic texts now began to be claimed for philology [Jouanna 1982]. Several generations on, interest in the body as an index of social dynamics of power and expertise has extended this trajectory of estrangement. Increasingly self-conscious about how our readings of the ancient world are conditioned by our own intellectual and cultural history, scholars have also pushed back the boundaries of the evidence, setting archaeological evidence and para-literary texts alongside the staples of medical literature from the Hippocratic corpus to Galen.

Helen King and Véronique Dasen, in their brief and lively introduction to ancient medicine, propose to address this complex diagnostic *scenario*. When it comes to the basic question King poses in her introduction—‘Did the Greco-Roman practice of medicine resemble our own?’ [3]—the aim of both authors is to remind readers that in weighing the differences and similarities, there are no simple answers. Understanding ancient medicine, they propose, requires an

© 2009 Institute for Research in Classical Philosophy and Science

All rights reserved

ISSN 1549–4497 (online)

ISSN 1549–4470 (print)

ISSN 1549–4489 (CD-ROM)

Aestimatio 6 (2009) 162–166

act of scholarly imagination that comes from full engagement with the range of evidence for Greco-Roman experience of the body.

The book has three parts. The first and longest is Dasen's French translation of King's *Greek and Roman Medicine*, originally published in 2001 in Bristol's Classical World Series. However, readers already familiar with this work in English will want to note that King has added a chapter on women and ancient medicine, 'Les femmes et la médecine antique' [1.8], and that Dasen has expanded the scope of the volume as a whole with two new dossiers of primary source material—all of which makes the French edition even richer and more useful than the earlier English version.¹ The dossier of texts in part 3 offers a judicious, if limited, assortment, ranging over a mere seven pages from the Hippocratic *Oath* to an excerpt from Gargilius Martialis' fourth-century AD *Remedies*. But it is the collection and discussion of visual images [Part 2. 'Médecine et iconographie: le discours d'images']—from vase paintings to votive reliefs and terracotta statuettes—that constitutes the crucial extension of King's close engagement with literary sources. In this volume, King and Dasen together succeed in offering general readers and beginning students a solid introduction to the history of ancient medicine, its theory, and its methodology. They also offer direct access to the archaeological materials and primary texts that support a multifaceted inquiry.

Given the brevity of the book and its broad scope, the great strength of King's account lies in her gift for distilling the distinctive features of the body as imagined by different sects and individuals and then showing what is at stake in the various attempts to map the human system and understand its pathologies. Since the Hippocratic body was one of humors in constant flux, the art of negotiating a balanced 'mode de vie' (δίαιτα) was medicine's central concern. Exercise, one's emotional state, and sleep were all part of 'dietetics', which means that to understand the reasons behind medical

¹ Also new in the French edition are a timeline of authors and works cited in the text (from the fifth century BC to the 19th century AD), a brief list of significant modern discoveries and inventions (from the microscope in the 17th century to the mapping of the human genome in 2003), and a general bibliography of primary sources (mostly in French translation) and secondary scholarship.

interventions, we need to understand whole constellations of cultural reference. The same substances might be both food and medicine in the Greco-Roman world, and it was often the resonance of myth and ritual that imbued *φάρμακα* with a symbolic power comparable in its workings to our modern placebo effect [1.7].

What happens, though, when humoral theories of individual self-regulation confront the sort of large-scale health crisis we would now call an epidemic? Thucydides' account of the fifth-century Athenian plague offers a case-study [1.3]. While retrospective biomedical diagnosis of the Athenian plague has long fascinated medical historians, King takes a different tack, investigating Thucydides' account to show that where explanatory models fall short, illness becomes a lightning-rod for issues of public morality. Women's medicine especially suggests that conceptions of order and disorder within the human body reflect strategies of social order; and as King suggests [1.8], our readings of the sources reflect, in turn, our own cultural biases. Scholarly attempts to identify a specifically female knowledge about ancient women's medical issues bear the imprint of post-classical medicine, whereas in fact, King argues, certain ideas about the female body—such as the notion that the womb wanders in search of hydration—were widely shared by female and male practitioners as well as their patients.

Since part of King's aim is to encourage awareness of the pre-conceptions modern scholars bring to ancient evidence, it is a perfect extension of this project to direct readers towards their own encounter with the primary sources, written and visual. From uterine amulets to a red-figure *aryballos* that depicts the inside of a doctor's office Dasen explores, in the 11 short chapters of part 2, the range of 'gestures that open, wound, and heal' [81], presenting a set of images with commentary that offer an inventory of the Greek collective imagination. Some of the most striking pieces in the visual dossier offer glimpses of the ancient body that go beyond written sources. A Sicilian terracotta statuette appears to represent a man with hemimelia [2.10], a condition that like most disabilities and congenital deformities is almost entirely absent from the medical literature. In other cases, the visual evidence extends or complicates what we know from literary sources. A vase painting contemporary with the Athenian plague shows a man in distress crouching before a small fire with a temple structure and a herm in the background [2.7]. Scholars are

divided: does this figure represent the object of a scapegoat ritual evoked to rid Athens of the plague? Or is he a plague victim seeking refuge near a sanctuary and trying to purify the air of *miasma* with his small fire? Can we distinguish between ritual and medical gesture?

As Dasen points out [94], much of the iconography of illness betrays a certain reticence about probing the body's interior. While scenes of wounding are widespread in fifth-century vase paintings, for example, the perspective is social rather than medical. The heroic wound in visual culture is clean, expressing the dynamics of human interaction and the ethics and aesthetics of war instead of exposing the messy interior [2.3]. Anatomical votives from Greece [2.6] likewise tend to represent the surface of the body (with the exception of the womb) rather than its internal pathology and rarely depict the ailment for which divine help is sought. Other healing votives emphasize the social context of the dedicant, showing his family or illustrating the ritual circumstances of the encounter with the god [2.5]. Compared with the graphic display of human entrails that characterizes the famous Etruscan anatomical votives [2.2], votives in the Greek context are notably restrained. Images of sacrifice remind us, on the other hand, that the ritual offering of animals provided the most regular spectacle of 'la géographie corporelle' [86] in the ancient world. Hippocratic thought-experiments in human dissection, Dasen suggests, recall gestures familiar from animal sacrifice that—with very few exceptions—could be transferred only imaginatively to the human body.

In sum, the authors offer an engaging introduction to Greco-Roman medicine—one that is grounded in the primary sources, written and visual, and deploys a sophisticated analytical lens. My only slight criticism is bibliographic: because King's text is, appropriately, footnote-free, an annotated or topic-specific bibliography of secondary literature for part 1 (on the model of the succinct 'Pour en savoir plus' that accompanies each section of part 2) would probably have helped novice undergraduate, graduate, and general readers interested in following up a particular line of inquiry. This is, obviously, a minor point in view of the volume's great strengths. Balanced, insightful, and stimulating, this small book will be useful to those who teach ancient medicine in a French-language context, or in a bilingual setting, where the English original could easily be used alongside. As

a stepping-stone to further study, it should make readers alert to the kinds of questions that we might ask about medicine in the ancient world—and prepared for the complexity of the answers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Jouanna, J. 1982. 'Littré, éditeur et traducteur d'Hippocrate'. *Revue de Synthèse* IIIe s. nos. 106–108:285–301.

King, H. 2001. *Greek and Roman Medicine*. Bristol.

Littré, E. 1839–1861. ed. *Oeuvres complètes d'Hippocrate*. Paris.