

Polybius and the Medical Tradition: An Intertextual Reading of Hippocrates' *On the Sacred Disease* and the *Histories*

This paper will investigate the possibility of Polybius' direct familiarity with *On the Sacred Disease* and his use of this text as a template for the model physician described in the *Histories*. The source of Polybius' knowledge of medical theory has been attributed to either a Hellenistic handbook (Walbank, 48; Wunderer, 104) or a visit to Alexandria (Pédech, xxxi-xxxiii). But there is no reason to doubt his acquaintance with elements of the Hippocratic corpus; the treatise *On the Sacred Disease* expounds a number of concepts that are echoed by Polybius in his *Histories*. The points of similarity consist of: 1) the importance of personal observation for research, 2) the use of a three-part system for the description of the development of diseases/events, and 3) the conviction that diseases/events can be rationally explained.

In his tirade against the historian Timaeus, Polybius criticizes him as being an armchair historian completely deficient in terms of field research (Polyb., 12.25d-25h). Polybius here directly compares the practices of History and Medicine. He rates surgery and pharmacology (i.e. hands-on experience) as more beneficial for medical knowledge than the theoretical study of diseases (Polyb., 12.25d.3). Just as there are arm-chair historians, so too are there theoretical physicians who are useless if given a living patient (Polyb., 12.25d.4-6). The author of *On the Sacred Disease* also valued personal observation over speculation. In rebutting the notion that any disease is more divine than others, the author describes the miraculous nature of fevers. He begins with a present-tense, first-person form of the verb ὁράω, and then relates a vivid passage—complete with *twelve* present participles modifying the object ἀνθρώπους—that certainly presents itself an eye-witness account (Hippoc. 1.19-27). Hippocrates states quite

bluntly that those who assert the divine nature of the “sacred disease” are ignorant tricksters who prey upon the gullibility of their clients and wrongly claim to have great knowledge (Hippoc. 2.27-32).

There is also a correlation between Polybius’ three-part system for describing the development of events and the tripartite description of the sacred disease’s manifestation by Hippocrates. After describing his own system, Polybius specifically compares the need for physicians to understand the causes of diseases in order to render effective treatment with the need for students of history to understand the causes of events. (Polyb., 3.7.4-6). Polybius’ statements are fully consistent with Hippocrates’ denunciation of those who prescribe bogus remedies as a result of their failure to understand the root of the disease (Hippoc., 2.6-15).

The third striking similarity between the precepts espoused in *On the Sacred Disease* and in the *Histories* is the attitudes of the authors concerning the habit of humans to ascribe events to divine powers. Polybius denounces those who credit divinities for bringing about events, while allowing that humans may, due to their imperfect ability to comprehend the world, rhetorically ascribe certain miraculous events to the gods (Polyb., 36.17.1-12). This passage fits well with Polybius’ general concern for establishing the practical, human causes for events. *On the Sacred Disease* is a *tour de force* declaration of the ability of humans to understand the world and the rational rules by which it operates. The opening of the treatise—an assertion that it was the ignorance of men that led to the declaration of this disease as “sacred”—foreshadows the sentiments of Polybius (Hippoc., 1.1-10). While the Hippocratic writer envisioned diseases as operating on a rational system, he also had a deep reverence for the inexplicable genesis/creator of this system (e.g. Hippoc., 21.1-8). In this we also find a parallel in Polybius’ invocation of the goddess τύχη.

Polybius clearly respected Medicine as a discipline of inquiry, and he sought to elucidate his ideal form of historical research through medical metaphors. Where did the model of his ideal physician originate? Polybius has often been dismissed as a second-rate scholar reliant upon Hellenistic handbooks and compendiums for his learned references (e.g. Walbank, 32-33); however, his close engagement with the Hippocratic text *On the Sacred Disease* suggests his literary interests extended to more antique sources. While Polybius unabashedly ridicules the only two physicians whom he names, it is possible that there may be a lost medical handbook behind his ideal physician. But *On the Sacred Disease* is an extant text that embodies all of the virtues which he ascribes to the ideal practice of medicine.

Bibliography

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