

Lithika: Ancient Medical and Technical Texts on Stones.

In his introduction of *Natural History*, Pliny lists about 20 Greek writers as authorities for his book XXXVII on minerals and precious stones, but, of the works of these authors, only the brief, or fragmentary, treatise on stones by Theophrastus has survived to inform us in a direct way of the extent of Greek learning in this field.

In his *On Stones* (Περὶ λίθων), Theophrastus is concerned with stones that are rare or have some special quality (Eichholz 1965: I 6): “Numerous stones... possess the characteristic differences in respect of color, hardness, softness, and other such qualities which cause them to be exceptional (δι’ ὧν τὸν περιττὸν).” Theophrastus was one of the earliest technical writers on stones and his work dates around 315–14 BCE (Eichholz 1965: 8-11). M. Smith (2004) has pointed out that Posidippus is relying to some degree on technical writing like Theophrastus’ *On Stones* and, from his technical sources, the Greek epigrammatic poet could derive his details about stones and their exceptional properties. Nearly all of the stones mentioned in Posidippus’ epigrams are also treated by Theophrastus. So far, Theophrastus’ *On Stones* and Pliny’s book XXXVII of the *Natural History* stand as bookends of technical writing on stones (Wellman 1935).

Furthermore, stones – and, to a lesser degree, also precious stones – held an important role in ancient medicine, especially in pharmacy and pharmacology. Some physicians dedicated a book or a chapter in their writings to stones, numbering bigger or smaller amounts of various minerals, from salts and common stones to more precious stones and gems. For example, in his *De Materia Medica*, Pedanius Dioscorides (1st century BCE) comprise a book on lapidary, where the author describes about 90 stones and their chemical substances, including their curative powers or application. In addition, Galen (1st century BCE) dedicated several chapters to stones,

metals and minerals of sea origin, in his work *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis et facultatibus libri* (Kühn XI, 379–XII, 1-377).

In this paper, I will compare how stones and their unique characteristics are treated in ancient medical and technical texts, focusing my attention on precious stones and their exceptional properties (for example: ὄνυξ, *onyx*, ἤλεκτρον, *amber*, κοράλλιον, *coral*, σάπφειρος, *sapphire* and ἴασπις, *jasper*). I will then investigate how literary texts (namely, *lithika*) refer to these medical and technical works, with the goal of understanding how the nature of the stone – some exceptional quality – might be connected to the meaning of the epigram.

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