

Unpacking the Internal and External Functions of Ancient Medical Texts

Ancient medical writings, which begin to appear in the fifth century BCE and become more common place in the fourth century, are somewhat mysterious in their purpose. Aristotle (*EN* 1181B) observes that men cannot become expert physicians from studying texts, and Xenophon suggests in his *Memorabilia* that a man simply cannot have sufficient natural ability for a field such as medicine – instead, teachers are required (*Mem.* 4.2.5). Indeed, as Morgan (1999, 60) notes, “...the written record of the Classical period preserves no explicit reference to texts being used for teaching,” and so one wonders what these medical texts were used for, and what kinds of practices Aristotle and Xenophon are arguing against. This paper suggests many of our surviving medical texts are marked by a split functionality within and without the medical field itself. These texts are a vital component in the developing medical field's self-definition, as well as a venue in which the medical arts can position themselves not only with regard to a growing number of competing disciplines, but also as a part of a dialogue between texts.

The fact that these treatises do not advertise themselves as providing an independently sufficient instruction to become a doctor does not mean that they were not useful in the practice of medicine. Lists occupy a prominent position in a number of early Hippocratic treatises, and, as Lonie (1983) argues, their presence suggests that these texts could be used as an *aide-mémoire* for practitioners at various stages of their careers. It is additionally possible, as Miller (1990) theorizes, that the process of writing down a case study transforms that event from an individual physician's experience to a data point that can factor into the ongoing effort of Greek physicians to develop further their medical theories.

Yet the use of texts was not uncontroversial within the medical field itself. For example, *On Ancient Medicine* comments in its opening lines that it is challenging those others who have

taken it upon themselves to speak *or write* about medicine (*VM* 1.1). In these medical texts we see a struggle to exclude related practices, such as magical healing and soothsaying, and to define what constitutes the medical art (cf. *Morb. Sacr.* 1.1). In *On Regimen in Acute Diseases* 3, the author states that in other texts, medical knowledge is being mixed with folk wisdom, and practitioners differ too much from each other, and thus medicine is exposed to the censure of the masses. The text suggests that a work such as itself can be valuable in uniting physicians around a single course of medical action, and thereby can strengthen each of their individual medical practices. Interestingly, when one examines the treatment of *kairos* within several medical texts (*Aph.* 1.1, *Praec.* 1.1), one finds that the focus on *kairos* serves to underscore the limitations of the text itself (cf. Eskin 2002). Texts might instruct in reason or theories, but only the experience gained through some sort of apprenticeship can yield understanding about when the *kairos* is upon you. Thus, these texts can suggest the kinds of learning that one might attain under the direction of an expert in the field. They can emphasize the importance of seeking out just such an expert for personal medical advice, as well as for a potential apprenticeship, precisely by pointing out the limits of what can be conveyed through written means about the art of medicine.

Taken together, then, these passages show various ways in which medical texts played a role in the growth and development of this burgeoning field. They allowed experienced physicians to refine their craft and build on data gathered by others, while at the same time serving as reference materials for new doctors on everything from the appropriate medical practice in a given situation to how to argue for a particular treatment regimen (cf. *Morb.* I.1). These texts helped to advance Hippocratic medicine in the reader's mind more generally, as they attacked the practitioners of other fields such as natural philosophy, but also advertised one particular individual – the author's – medical competency.

Bibliography

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