



Calloway Scott // Early histories of medicine in the west typically traced the “invention” of scientific medicine to the “Greek miracle” of the Classical era (500-323 BCE). That this historiographic narrative—offering contemporary medical method and thought a compelling and authoritative origin—suited a wide variety of 19th and early 20th century interests is hardly surprising. Positivist histories of western medicine have since typically begun with—or at the very least counted among their early chapters—surveys of Greek and Roman medicine as they excelled their earlier Mediterranean neighbors in Egypt and the Near-east. Here, I do not survey the emergence, developments, or characteristic features of “Greek” medicine as it was more or less “sophisticated” than that of Assyria or Egypt. Rather, in what follows I want to focus on how Greeks themselves came to perceive their medicine as something culturally distinct from that of their neighbors, and, more significantly, how discourses of Greek identity adopted medicine as a defining aspect of “Hellenicity.” That is to say, I want to discover the discovery of “Greek” medicine.

Let’s begin with the Homeric epics. These poems know a variety of healers—from the battlefield medics of the *Iliad* to the healing spell-casters of the *Odyssey*. Yet even within this early and medically plural society, Egypt loomed large as a land of hyper-potent drugs and expert practitioners wielding a craft as ancient as the Nile itself. This perception may harken back to the Bronze Age context in which the predecessors to Homeric epic were being composed, where we find a robust trade in *materia medica* and medical experts circulating widely across the Mediterranean basin. A 14th century BCE shipwreck off the coast of Turkey was discovered to contain over a half-ton of terebinth resin (a common pharmaceutical ingredient) probably en route to the Aegean from Syria. Still earlier Egyptian medical papyri refer to recipes including flora grown on the island of Crete, indicating a reciprocal trade in medical goods and knowledge.

Nevertheless, within this “global” Bronze Age economy, Egyptian healers seemed to have commanded particular respect, often traveling as physician-diplomats to the foreign courts of Babylon and beyond.

But for all its veneration as a land of drugs and healers, there is no sense in our earliest Greek records that Egyptian medicine differed in kind or method from that of the Greeks. Its power resided simply in its exotic origins and expense. In fact, it is not until the Classical period of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, with Herodotus’ account of the wars fought between the Greeks and Persians, that we can see a recognition that “Greek” methods and traditions of healing might be distinct from those of the Egyptians, Persians, Indians, Thracians, or Scythians. Indeed, the various perceptions of, attitudes toward, ways of caring for the body stood out to Herodotus as more than noteworthy curiosities. In his “medical ethnographies” (Thomas 2000) Herodotus lights upon medicine precisely as an analytical framework or tool for revealing deep truths about the nature and structure of other cultures and for reflecting Greek’s own normative values. So, while Herodotus is relatively silent about “Greek” medicine, he implicitly outlines its features in commenting upon and cataloguing the medical practices and habits of others. Medicine had arrived, not just as a “*techne*” of healing, but a technology of cultural taxonomy and hierarchy in which Greeks stood apart from and above others.

The texts of the Hippocratic Corpus had their role to play in this calcification of medico-cultural identity. The text *Airs, Waters, Places* (the central ideas of which Herodotus seems familiar with) is famous for its proto-environmental determinism. In the latter half of the text the author energetically describes how the “slavish and soft” culture of those residing in Asia is a natural result of a clement environment and landscape which produces everything in abundance (here, again, we can detect a pointed animus against the Persians in the wake of the Wars). Taking another tack, the author of *Ancient Medicine* describes the discovery of medicine as a triumph of Greek empiricism and experimentation, noting that “barbarians” suffer still in ignorance of it. As Jouanna (2012) saw, this author’s medical historiography not only bruits Greek origins over Egyptian claims to priority, it suppresses Egypt altogether by lumping it among an undifferentiated rabble of “barbarians” (*barbaroi*). *Ancient Medicine* thus makes the Greeks the sole discoverers and *unique* practitioners of medical science, a claim reiterated (and redirected) by medical authors up through the Roman Empire and beyond.

Yet it is a different set of “Hippocratic” texts which best showcase the power of medicine to harden cultural boundaries and historical enmities: the so-called *Letters of Hippocrates* (*Epistulae Hippocratis*). These pseudepigraphica—transmitted in the earliest manuscripts of the Hippocratic Corpus—masquerade as speeches given by Hippocrates (and his son) or as epistolary correspondence between the “father of medicine” and other political and intellectual lights of his age. Although they pretend to be documents of the Classical age, they were almost certainly composed in the Hellenistic period or later. Despite their fictitious nature and rhetorical function, these letters contain new, popular information about Hippocrates’ biography and shed valuable light on plausible cultural attitudes about the status of “Greek” medicine in the early Hellenistic

world. This again points up the kind of “boundary work” medicine could perform for Greeks interested in inventing their own intellectual and cultural histories.

As Smith (1990) has shown, there are good reasons to date the longest of these texts, the *Presbeutikos* (or “The Embassy,” *Ep.* 27), to sometime at end of the 4th or beginning of the 3rd century BCE—that is, a generation or two after Hippocrates’ death. Within “The Embassy”—a speech given by Hippocrates’ son Thessalus to the Athenians enumerating his family’s illustrious deeds—we find Hippocrates cast not merely as a celebrity physician, but, as the inventor and perfecter of the medical art. In fact, the *Letters* elevate Hippocrates still further through his repeated and explicit assimilation with Herakles, culture hero *par excellence* and savior of Greeks from exogenous and terrible Others. The *Letters*, then, consistently depict Hippocrates as a new Herakles, exercising his native Greek science.

Within these literary fictions, Hippocrates’ most famous deed is not the subduing of the Lernean Hydra (although it is plausible that this myth—precursor to St. George and his dragon—reflects pre-modern struggles with malaria). Hippocrates is celebrated for saving Greeks from pestilential threats, “cleansing the great land and sea of wild and savage diseases” (*Ep.* 2). “The Embassy” inaugurates this tradition, as Thessalus reminds the Athenians of the time when the Paeonians and Illyrians—peoples to the north of “Hellas”—called upon Hippocrates to save them from a plague wrecking devastation among their people, a service for which Hippocrates would be handsomely rewarded. Hippocrates agrees at once, traveling to the northern borderlands and taking careful note of the disease’s signs, symptoms, and nature. Yet, after gathering all the diagnostically relevant information, Hippocrates abruptly reneges on the deal, abandoning the Paeonians and Illyrians to their own devices and despair. Returning to Greece, Hippocrates gathers his son and other pupils, issuing to them prophylactic remedies and instructing them to travel the extent of the “Hellenic” world to distribute this medical advice. Hippocrates, the physical embodiment of “Greek” medicine, is thus concerned only to apply it in the aid of those communities which belong within the boundaries of the “Hellenic” world.

Hippocrates’ refusal to offer medical aid to non-Greeks in times of plague served as inspiration for further *Letters* (and the painting by Anne-Louis Girodet accompanying this post). A series of letters sent by Artaxerxes, King of Persia, through envoys to Hippocrates, deploys a similar narrative. The Persians, beset by a deadly plague, again attempt to induce Hippocrates by promises of vast wealth. While Hippocrates rebuffs the offer as he did in the case of the earlier plague, his reasoning is more hostile and couched in explicitly ethnic motivations:

Hippocrates the doctor to Hystanes, governor of the Hellespont, greetings. In response to the letter you sent which you say came from the king, write down and send him as quickly as possible what I say: of food, clothes, shelter, and all the things needed for life I have enough. It is not right that I enjoy Persian wealth, nor that I save barbarians from disease, as they are the enemies of the Greeks. (*Ep.* 5a).

Pricilla Wald (2008), in a Durkheimian mood, neatly examines how outbreak and contagion narratives help to us to visualize, sustain, and even reify communities which otherwise remain notional, abstract. In the *Letters of Hippocrates* we can see one aspect this work in progress, as Hippocrates' actions define a vague Hellenic community separated by distance and politics. In the "Embassy," Hippocrates' disciples make a virtual tour of the Hellenic community as they go about the business of protecting some parts of the world while ignoring others. Similarly, the quasi-divine Hippocrates, now the very embodiment of medical science, weaponizes this knowledge against the Greeks' ultimate antagonist and self-definitional Other, the Persians. The invention of "Greek" medicine, whether in Herodotus, the later pseudepigraphica, or even their reception in contemporary handbooks of Western medicine—is wrapped up in the narrative histories which underpin cultural identity and police the boundaries of its membership.

Featured Image: *Hippocrates refusing the gifts of Artaxerxes*. Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

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