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Voices from the Editorial Board

Ancient Medicine and European Medical Historiography

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What could a new, European journal of the history of medicine and health mean for the study of medicine in the Graeco-Roman world? The question is worth asking, for, contrary to some other areas and timeframes of medical history, Graeco-Roman medicine has in general been well served by (continental) European scholars over the last fifty years. While contributions from the UK and North America were by no means lacking, we can say without hesitation that for several decades the field was dominated by French, Italian, German and later also Spanish scholarship; and work was mostly published in languages other than English.

We may conveniently regard the foundation, in Strasbourg in 1972, of the *Colloque International Hippocratique* as an important factor and marker of this situation. The *Colloque* was subsequently held triennially in a variety of universities on the European continent (and once in francophone Canada) and became the authoritative forum providing a regular meeting point for scholars working on 'Hippocratic' medicine and its legacy; and its multilingual conference volumes were widely recognised as representing the state of the art in the subject.

From the 1980s onwards, the annual meetings of the Arbeitskreis Alte Medizin in Mainz served a similar function, and selected papers from these meetings were sometimes published (in German or English) in *Medizinhistorisches Journal*. The subject gained momentum, and the field began to attract more and more classicists, ancient historians and classical archaeologists, alongside medical historians and members of the medical profession.

In research, there was a strong focus on the edition, translation and interpretation of Greek and Latin medical texts, many of which were still unavailable in proper critical editions or modern translations. After the fall of the Berlin wall, the prestigious *Corpus Medicorum Graecorum* series of critical editions of Greek medical texts was revived under the aegis of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences; and medical texts by, or attributed to, Hippocrates, Galen, Soranus and several Latin medical writers made their appearance in the distinguished bilingual Budé series of the *Collection des Universités de France*. Indeed, the study of Roman medicine, and of ancient Latin medical authors such as Celsus, Pliny the Elder, Caelius Aurelianus and Scribonius Largus emancipated itself from the dominance of Greek medicine and gave rise, from the late 1980s onwards, to a series of conferences on *Textes médicaux latins*, again held mostly in Mediterranean locations (and several times in Switzerland), while the more technical, philological and codicological aspects of the transmission of Greek medical literature received dedicated attention at the *Ecdotica de testi medici greci* conference series held alternately in Italy and France.

Yet it was in the UK, in Cambridge in 1979, that the first colloquium devoted to Galen of Pergamum was held, and this set the tone for follow up meetings on aspects of Galen's work in Germany, Spain, France and Italy. Two of the volumes emerging from these Galen conferences were published in Brill's *Studies in Ancient Medicine* book series, whose foundation in the late 1980s, followed by that of their journal *Early Science and Medicine* in the mid 1990s, marked the rising interest in ancient (and medieval) medicine in the English-speaking world. Here, the meetings of the Society for Ancient Medicine and Pharmacy, their regular Newsletters and their presence at panel sessions of the annual conferences of the American Philological Association played an important role in raising the subject's profile in the anglophone domain.

In parallel to this development, a more thematic and contextual approach – and not one exclusively or primarily text-oriented – began to take shape. Students of ancient philosophy and science discovered ancient medicine as an important source of information for the study of Graeco-Roman thought; and ancient historians, classical archaeologists and historians of religion were increasingly fascinated by ancient medicine – broadly defined as attitudes, perceptions and understandings of health and disease and related behaviour

and practices – as a reflection of Greek, Roman and early-Christian social life, culture and mentality. At the 1992 Leiden conference *Ancient Medicine in its Socio-Cultural Context*, several scholars tried to apply insights, concepts and theoretical perspectives derived from medical anthropology, material culture and object studies, and from the social and cultural study of medical history to the ancient world. In the UK during the early 2000s, the annual *Approaches to Ancient Medicine* conferences, held at Newcastle, Reading, Exeter and Cardiff, aimed to promote the cross-disciplinary dialogue between the historiography of medicine and the study of the Graeco-Roman world; and ancient medicine became a regular topic of panel sessions at the annual general meetings of the Classical Association. Both conference series provided opportunities, particularly for PhD students and junior postdocs to present their work, thus reflecting the fact that ancient medicine was gaining ever-broader appeal in Classical Studies and Ancient Culture degree programmes at British and North American universities; in some cases, this applied also to medical faculties, where Medicine in the Classical World (and its reception) was available as an option for Special Study Modules, Student Selected Components and intercalated Masters courses.

The rise of interest in ancient medicine in the English-speaking world continued with the *Colloque International Hippocratique* being held in Newcastle (2002), Austin, Texas (2008) and Manchester (2015). Meanwhile, Cambridge University Press started a series of *Cambridge Galen Translations*, while the venerable bilingual Loeb Classical Library, published by Harvard University Press, included Galen more prominently in its hitherto rather conservative canon of classical authors. Beyond textual studies, the viability of approaches to ancient medicine from material culture and gender studies was demonstrated by a new series *Medicine and the Body in Antiquity* founded by Ashgate and now continued by Routledge.

As a result, ancient medicine is now a well-respected area within Classical Studies both in the English-speaking world and in continental Europe, where the subject has continued to grow and given rise to book series such as De Gruyter's *Science, Technology and Medicine in Ancient Cultures*, the *Medica Graecolatina* series published by Andavira Editora (Santiago de Compostela), and the new initiative *Current Issues in Ancient Medicine* recently announced by Schwabe Verlag. This development is reflected in academic journals as well. Ancient philosophy journals such as *Phronesis*, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, *Antiquorum philosophia* and *Apeiron* increasingly welcome articles on the philosophical ideas of medical writers such as Galen, Erasistratus or Asclepiades; and mainstream classical and ancient history journals such as the *Classical Quarterly*, *Revue des Etudes Grecques*, *Hermes*, *Historia* and *Greek*,

Roman and Byzantine Studies now regularly feature contributions on Greek and Latin medical literature and thought, and on the social, economic, institutional and cultural aspects of healthcare in the Graeco-Roman world. The growth of the subject is further demonstrated by the foundation, in 2007, of the dedicated multilingual journal *Galenos*, which provides a specialist forum for the philological study of Greek and Latin medical texts, including their transmission in Arabic, Hebrew and Syriac.

In a way, then, we may say that over the last twenty or thirty years, the study of ancient medicine has become less predominantly European and more global. Indeed, Graeco-Roman medicine is now enjoying growing interest in East Asia, where the Japanese journal *Historia Scientiarum* regularly features contributions (in Japanese and in English) on Greek medical thought; China, as in so many other fields, is rapidly catching up in the study of Greek and Roman medicine; and there is a growing number of contributions from Latin American countries such as Brazil and Columbia.

This widening perspective raises questions about what constitutes 'ancient' medicine. In the preceding paragraphs, I have tacitly been switching between 'ancient' and 'Graeco-Roman' or 'Classical'; but, of course, there was a plurality of medical cultures, ideas and practices in the ancient Mediterranean, let alone in other parts of the world. One of the developments in medico-historical scholarship of the last fifty years has been the increasing realisation and re-appreciation of the cultural importance of Egyptian and Mesopotamian medicine alongside Greek and Roman, and of the diversity *within* Graeco-Roman, Egyptian and Mesopotamian medicine. The days of triumphant Hellenocentrism and the belief in '*le miracle grec*' are long behind us and have given way to a less normative and more comparative approach to the study of attitudes, beliefs and practices related to health and disease in ancient civilisations.

Yet after Hellenocentrism, Eurocentrism was another cultural prejudice to be challenged. For, with globalisation, and with the rising recognition of 'traditional' or 'alternative' medical systems in today's healthcare provision, doubts have been raised about the legitimacy of the privileged position of Graeco-Roman medicine – long portrayed in teleological narratives as the foundation of modern biomedicine, with Hippocrates as the 'Father of medicine' – in comparison to Chinese, Indian and other 'non-Western' ancient medical traditions. As a result of this recognition of the need to redress the balance, the academic study of medical history in ancient China, Japan, India, Tibet, Mexico and South America has gained ground and no longer requires justification. Likewise, the study of medicine and science in the Islamic world is thriving,

and the field has been shown to involve much more than just the preservation of Greek culture in Arabic, Syriac and Hebrew translations.

Furthermore, in the current vibrant debates about diversity in academic scholarship, a new series of pressing questions has arisen as to who are the right persons to study these ancient medical traditions. What makes Western scholarship's claims to expertise and privileged access to the understanding of Graeco-Roman culture in general, and medicine in particular, more legitimate than the claims of scholars from other parts of the world? Or when it comes to the study of Ayurvedic or Chinese medical history, how do the voices of scholars who have themselves been brought up in these still-living traditions and who have personally experienced these medical practices compare to the distanced paradigms established by predominantly male, white, middle-aged Western professors?

The last word in these partly academic, partly political debates has not yet been spoken, though it is not inconceivable that at some point the pendulum will start swinging back in the other direction, as is already becoming manifest in the re-emergence of local, regional and national historical narratives alongside global perspectives. It is at any rate clear that the study of Graeco-Roman medicine as a component of what later came to be known as 'European medical history' or 'the Western medical tradition' has to reposition itself in the face of these challenges. One relatively obvious way of achieving this is to abandon its previous claims to superiority. That does not mean sacrificing the belief in the distinctiveness of Graeco-Roman medicine and its enormous historical influence on the subsequent development of medical theory and practice in the Middle Ages, the Islamic world and the early modern period. For this distinctiveness and influence are not disputed, nor is their value as factors justifying the continued study of the subject.

Yet there are two further respects in which a new, European journal of the history of medicine and health could be of significant benefit to the study of Graeco-Roman medicine and other ancient medical cultures. First, it provides scholars from non-English speaking countries (European as well as non-European) working on ancient medicine with a welcome new opportunity, and an encouragement, to publish their work in an internationally recognised forum. And secondly, it offers a much-needed occasion for scholars from all over the world to pursue what I have referred to above as the cross-disciplinary dialogue between the historiography of medicine and the study of ancient civilisations. That dialogue is often difficult because of issues of accessibility of the ancient sources, lack of sufficient primary evidence to provide answers to legitimate research questions, and the worry that questions arising from the study of modern medical history may be anachronistic or inappropriate to the study

of older material. These difficulties partly explain why attempts to promote this dialogue by means of panel sessions on 'early' medicine in conferences of the Society for the Social History of Medicine or the European Association for the History of Medicine and Health have had only limited success. For these panel sessions are mostly attended by people working on the early material anyway, whereas what is needed is an integrative approach bringing together people working on different time frames.

These difficulties also partly explain the regrettable fact that, in spite of the global rise of interest in ancient medicine of the last fifty years, articles on the subject still figure relatively rarely in mainstream history of medicine journals (though there are exceptions, such as *Medicina nei Secoli*, which regularly publishes special issues on classical and medieval medicine). If you have written a study on Graeco-Roman medicine and you are looking for a publisher, would you offer it to a classical journal, or to a history of medicine journal? The answer may depend on your background, the networks in which you participate, the audiences you wish to address and the nature of the feedback you are looking to receive. But it would definitely help if there were a journal actively promoting such cross-disciplinary dialogue, for example, by means of special issues dedicated to medico-historical themes and problems relevant to a variety of time frames and geographical areas. If the present journal can contribute to such an integrative approach, it will provide a persuasive answer to the question raised at the beginning of this piece.