The term ‘Hippocrates’ can have two meanings: in a narrow sense, it refers to the classical Greek doctor, a contemporary of Socrates, who originally came from the island of Cos and belonged to a family of Asclepiads. His fame in his own lifetime is attested by two references in Plato’s Protagoras and Phaedrus. In a wider sense, ‘Hippocrates’ refers to the collection of some sixty medical writings transmitted under his name in medieval manuscripts. Although we might reasonably attribute some of these writings to Hippocrates’ hand (without having absolute criteria with which to identify them), it is clear that not all of them could have been written by the same person. Some are works by his students. For example, one of the most famous treatises of the Hippocratic Corpus, the Nature of Man, known above all for its theory of the four humours which constitute human beings (blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile), was written by Polybus, Hippocrates’ student and son-in-law. However, alongside the group of writings originating from the Hippocratic School, or the School of Cos, there is a group of nosological treatises that originate from another medical centre, the Asclepiads of Cnidus. Finally, there are other treatises, philosophical in nature, which form a third group and are of unknown origin. Thus, the Corpus is composed of writings of various kinds. Moreover, the treatises that comprise it were not written at the same time. The majority belong to the second half of the fifth century or the start of the fourth century; thus, they are contemporary with Hippocrates. However, other treatises date from the period of Aristotle or later. Nevertheless, despite these differences in origin or date, the Hippocratic Corpus presents an undeniable unity.

This unity stems primarily from the fact that all the authors practice a rational medicine. At first sight, the attitude of these doctors towards the sacred, when they talk about it, is fairly homogeneous. In adherence with the rationalism of the century of Pericles, they criticise (sometimes vigorously, as we will see below) those doctors who believe that a disease may be

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caused by the intervention of a particular deity, and they contrast a divine cause with a rational one. They even criticise those seers or interpreters of dreams who cross into the domain of medicine. However, we should not infer, as is often done, that the rationalism of the Hippocratic doctors is opposed to the notion of the divine, or is incompatible with traditional religion. Indeed, we will see below that the situation is more blurred: one doctor’s position on the problem of the sacred is not necessarily the same as another’s, and in the treatise in which attacks against magico-religious medicine are most impassioned, traditional sanctuary religion is not called into question. In order to obtain a better understanding of this two-sided attitude of the writers of the Hippocratic Corpus, we will in the third part of this paper examine not only the written works, as philologists do, but attempt to place these ideas on the sacred and the divine in the historical context of the life of Hippocrates of Cos, a member of the Asclepiad family, and examine, using literary and epigraphic evidence, the relationship of the Asclepiads with the important healing sanctuaries of Asclepius or Apollo at Delphi.

The Hippocratic doctors’ rationalist attitude towards the sacred is particularly apparent regarding what the ancients called the ‘sacred disease’, and what we call epilepsy.1 Contrary to what we might believe, the term ‘sacred disease’ is not a fifth-century lay equivalent of a technical term for a disease. We find the term in the medical texts of the Hippocratic Corpus. For example, the author of the gynaecological treatise Diseases of Women 2, when describing the symptoms of an affliction of women who suddenly lose their ability to speak, says that they exhibit “the same symptoms as someone afflicted by the sacred disease.” 2 Since the ‘sacred disease’ is used here as a reference, in a technical treatise, to describe another disease, it clearly described an affliction that was well known by doctors, and the term ‘sacred disease’, whose symptoms were codified, was clearly accepted by specialists. We could draw the same conclusion from the first attestation of the ‘sacred disease’ outside the technical writings of the Hippocratic Corpus, in Herodotus: Cambyses, having sacrilegiously struck the ox Apis, becomes mad and murders his brother and his wife (who was also his sister). Thus,