

## The Discovery of Dietetics

*I have discovered regimen, with the gods' help, as far as it is possible for mere man to discover it.*

(*Vict.* 4.93)

### Introduction

The dietetic approach to health outlined in the introduction is amongst the most remarkable achievements of the ancient Greeks, and the related methods of health preservation introduced by Greek physicians and medical authors have had a great impact on later discussions of the topic as well as influencing our modern views to a great extent. Regarding this heritage and its early history it should be noted that in the first half of the fourth century dietetics is still occasionally considered as a novelty deviating from traditional views. A good example of such reflections can be found in Plato, who provides both a critical and a responsive reflection on the new developments. On the one hand, in the *Charmides* Plato's Socrates speaks highly of 'good physicians' (ἀγαθῶν ἰατρῶν) who do not cure painful eyes by themselves but rather treat the eyes together with the head and the whole body: 'In keeping with this principle, they plan a regime (διδάτταις) for the whole body with the idea of treating and curing the part along with the whole'.<sup>1</sup> In this passage Socrates obviously praises dietetics especially for the application of the holistic approach.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, in the *Republic* Socrates expresses a severe criticism against the extensive use of dietetic prevention and disapproves of the new kind of medicine. This 'plays nursemaid to the disease' and Socrates therefore suggests to his interlocutor Glaucon that it is shameful 'to need medical help, not for wounds or because of some seasonal illness, but because, through idleness and the life-style we've described, one is full of gas and phlegm like a stagnant swamp, so that sophisticated Asclepiad doctors are forced to come up with names like "flatulence" and "catarrh" to describe one's diseases'.<sup>3</sup> Plato reflects

1 Plato, *Chrm.* 156b3–c6, ed. Burnet, trans. Kent Sprague.

2 Cf. Plato, *Phdr.* 270c, where the holistic approach of Hippocrates' method is commended.

3 Plato, *R.* 405c7–d4, ed. Burnet, trans. Grube. Cf. *Flat.* 10 (Jouanna 116.10–119.2 = L. 6.104–108) as a possible target of such a criticism.

here not only on the new medical terminology, but also on the new medical approach which explains diseases from changes in life-style (*δίαιτα*) and cures them by the same means. He ridicules this new trend through the example of the gymnastics trainer Herodicus, and takes dietetics as an inferior or even redundant branch of medicine.<sup>4</sup> The new medicine, as Plato indicates, ‘was not used before Herodicus’, for no one in the old days ‘has leisure to spend all his life in being ill and doctoring himself.’<sup>5</sup> The main objection against dietetics expressed in the passage rests on a certain threat which is deeply embedded in the very nature of preventive dietetics, namely that it obliterates the borders between health and disease, that such type of care has no natural limits and therefore can easily consume all our time. In the end, one can ‘live out his life under medical treatment, with no leisure for anything else whatever’, as Plato describes Herodicus’ way of life.<sup>6</sup> Of course, there are, according to Plato, more important things one should live for, and this holds not only for philosophers, but for ordinary men as well. When a carpenter, to mention another of Plato’s examples, is sick, ‘he expects physicians to give him a drug in order to vomit the disease out, or get rid of it by purging it below or using cautery or surgery’. But if a dietician prescribes him a long diet, ‘soon he says he has no leisure to be sick and that there is no advantage in living such a life, paying heed to this disease and neglecting the work at hand’. As a result, he comes back to his ordinary regimen and either ‘recovers his health’ or ‘dies and escapes all his troubles’ if his body is not strong enough to resist.<sup>7</sup>

Both these passages attest and conveniently illustrate the rise of the new approach to health and the corresponding advances of medicine in the Classical period, which culminates in the dietetic prevention.<sup>8</sup> In the light of other extant evidence on Herodicus, which I discuss below, Plato’s supposition that there was no dietetic prevention before this extravagant trainer of athletes seems to be relatively accurate, historically speaking. The aim of this chapter is to reconstruct the history of dietetics from its beginnings up to the most elaborated forms of dietetic therapy and prevention attested in some of

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4 Cf. Plato, *R.* 459c, where Plato views dieticians as second-rate specialists compared to the more enterprising and venturesome physicians curing by drugs.

5 Plato, *R.* 406a–c, trans. Grube (modified).

6 Plato, *R.* 406b4–8, trans. Grube (modified).

7 Plato, *R.* 406d–e, trans. Grube (modified).

8 As pointed out by Totelin 2009, 132–133, Aristophanes (*Ra.* 939–943, eds. Coulon and van Daele) compares dietetics with tragedy, playing on words alluding to dietetic practice and ‘accusing it of being pedantic and bookish’.