PART TWO

THE BODY AND SPACE
THE ‘LOCUS AFFECTUS’ IN ANCIENT MEDICAL THEORIES OF DISEASE

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This paper seeks to explore ancient medical concepts of the spaces inside the human body. In particular, it examines the concept of the affected place (locus affectus, πεπονθὸς τόπος), a way of thinking about disease which focuses on the internal spaces of the body, and attempts to identify which of these places is affected by each disease. This concept achieved its fullest expression in Galen’s text De locis affectis, in which Galen describes diseases in terms of the organs they affect, and the ways in which these affections manifest themselves in the body. This work was very popular in antiquity, and became one of the most influential medical texts in the Middle Ages. As a result, the concept of an affected place acquired great significance in medical diagnostics and pathology.

Despite this popularity, the concept of the locus affectus was highly contested in ancient medical thought. The greatest opponents to the concept were the Methodists, who doubted the very possibility of identifying these affected parts. Instead, Methodists argue that diseases are caused by general conditions of the body, which affect all parts at once. Speculation about individual affected parts is therefore irrelevant, since the overall treatment is governed by the overall nature of the disease, not by the part of the body which appears to be most affected.

This paper is not concerned with the early history of the locus affectus, nor with the evidence of spatial thinking that exists in the works of Hippocratic and fourth century physicians. It will, instead, examine the effect of this concept on the pathology of Galen and Caelius Aurelianus. It will first outline Galen’s use of the concept in pathology and diagnostics, as they are laid out in De locis affectis. The paper will then discuss the

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1 I would like to express my thanks to the editors for inviting me to participate in this volume, and to Philip van der Eijk for his comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this article. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
3 For a review of spatial thinking in the Hippocratic Corpus, see Beate Gundert, “Parts and Their Roles in Hippocratic Medicine,” Isis 83.3 (1992), 453–65.