THE RECEPTION OF THE HIPPOCRATIC TREATISE ON GLANDS

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Summary*

Authorship, date and milieu are first considered. It is noted that ancient medical knowledge of glands and the lymphatic system depends on comparative anatomy; culinary use and sacrificial practice are significant. The approach of early modern editors such as Foesius and Zwinger to the work and the citations of doctor-philologists such as Caius are discussed. In reactions to the discoveries of Aselli and others, many Hippocratic works were cited, but rarely On Glands, despite its relevance to debates on the nature, routes and contents of bodily ducts, as well as to debates on teleology and to debates on the value of comparative anatomy. General and more particular explanations for this neglect are suggested. The work of van der Linden, van Horne and others is discussed. It appears from the selective nature of citation that familiarity was restricted to certain parts of On Glands while its overall visionary character went unnoticed.

Introduction

According to a recent medical judgment of the Hippocratic treatise On Glands:

The modern scientist stands amazed before the innovative concepts expounded in this ancient medical document. Indeed, the functional anatomy of the lymphatic system and lymph nodes emerges with impressive precision [...] an absolutely modern interpretation of their physiopathological significance.¹

The seventeen sections of this short treatise can be summarised as follows: the general character of glands in nature and appearance is

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outlined (1); the nature and cause of maladies affecting them is described (2); their distribution and function is indicated (3); an association of glands, moisture and hair is postulated (4); it is allowed that hair is absent from some places where glands are present (5). Particular glandular areas are discussed: the kidneys (6); the neck (7); the armpits and groin (8); the intestines (9); the head, specifically the brain (10). It is stated that the head may send an excess of moisture in flux to the ears, the eyes, the nose, the throat, the oesophagus, the spine or the hip joint (11); and that the brain itself may be affected if this flux goes wrong (12). The relatively minor hazards of fluxes to the eyes, nose and ears are outlined (13); flux via the oesophagus (to the belly) and via the trachea (to the lungs) and the dangers of flux to the hips are described (14). It is noted that the brain may suffer other dangerous maladies, affecting the rest of the body also (15). Finally, a glandular difference – breasts – between men and women is discussed (16–17).

The Hippocratic writer makes a serious and wide-ranging attempt to observe the broad anatomy, to understand the underlying physiology, and to account for the general pathology of glands. The opening words of the treatise are programmatic: ‘On glands as a whole, this is the situation’; that is, the system is discussed. The perception that distant and apparently disparate parts of the body, which can be described and identified, have an underlying connection and similar function demonstrates a fundamental insight in both anatomical and physiological terms. The pathological content is similarly impressive in its recognition of systemic disease. The author’s remarkable achievement in addressing and accomplishing such an ambitious enterprise defies the inherent complexity of the topic, and prefigures the long gradual process of discovery, observation and deduction which underlies present day knowledge of glands and the lymphatic system. To some extent, the modern process of discovery, beginning in the seventeenth century AD, is parallel to the ancient, of the fourth century BC. This paper outlines some parallels and suggests reasons for the apparent failure in the Early Modern period to recognise the insights contained in On Glands. The author’s all-embracing approach, with its recognition that glandular parts belong to an integrated system, is his greatest achievement and yet paradoxically may be the main reason for neglect of his work by later authors, who were concerned for the most part with limited parts of that system. But there are other reasons also, related to early modern approaches to Hippocratic texts and preconceptions about their content.