Collyrium Names Attested on Stone Tablets:
The Example of the Helvetian Corpus

Muriel Pardon-Labonnelie

Abstract

Collyrium-stamps are usually parallelepipedic stones that might have been used in the
Roman world, between the second part of the first century and the fourth century A.D.,
to stamp eye medicine. On their four narrow sides, those seals contain instructions
engraved in retrograde characters, of varying drawing quality, sometimes in Greek,
mostly in Latin and in an abbreviated form. These markings represent some sort of
medical prescriptions since they contain one or more of the following information:
a personal name in the genitive case, a collyrium name, therapeutic instructions, and a
method of administration. Like personal names and therapeutic instructions, collyr-
ium names suggest that Roman eye medicine was inscribed in the Greek medical tradi-
tion. A comparison between the collyrium names engraved on the seals unearthed in
Switzerland and the collyrium names known through our reading the Greek medi-
cal texts allows for an estimation of the influence of Greek ophthalmology on Roman
eye medicine.

In Graeco-Roman antiquity, “collyrium” is not always a “medicine with a local
action, generally in liquid form, applied on the conjunctiva for the treatment
of eye or eyelid ailments.”¹ According to Greek etymology, this medicine pre-
sents itself in the form of a κολλύριον, i.e. a “small stick.”² According to ancient
medical texts, the ingredients used in the composition of “collyria” are finely
ground, baked or even reduced to ashes and mixed with a liquid; thus, they
turn into a paste that is dried by the air and then used when needed—after a
final preparation—to treat various diseases.³

* Translated by Pascale Monfils, subsequently revised by Jon Wilcox.

¹ Imbs (ed.) (1977: 5, 1053, 2, s.u. “Collyre”). For a modern technical use of the term, Delamare
(ed.) (2006 29 : 187, 1, s.u. “Collyre”): “Medicine, generally liquid, meant to be applied on the
conjunctiva” (trans. is mine).
More than three hundred small tablets might have been used to stamp “collyria” while the medicine’s consistency was still paste-like.⁴ Those tablets—generally of parallelepiped form—would have been used from the middle of the first century to the fourth century of our era.⁵ Their four narrow faces hold engraved information in retrograde characters—with a varying drawing quality—more often in Latin, in an abbreviated form. Such inscriptions present medical specifications. To the present state of research, they include one piece of information or more, interpreted as follows: a personal name in the genitive case, a medicine’s name, a therapeutic indication, and a method of administration. When abbreviations are intelligible, a comparative analysis of the medicines’ names and therapeutic indications shows that, in the ancient Roman world, those stone tablets were most likely used to stamp the medicines meant to treat ocular ailments.⁶

Many clues suggest that “collyrium-stamps” were used by practitioners of Greek origin or, at least, of Greek culture. For instance, some inscriptions present ornamented letters borrowed from the Greek alphabet:⁷ some even have a Latin text engraved with Greek characters.⁸ Moreover, a great number of engraved personal names—in the genitive case—lead one to believe that the stone-tablet users were (or pretended to be) of Greek origin or, at least, that they had put their professional work under the protection of a Greek medical authority or deity.⁹ However, the written form alone is not enough to measure the influence of the Greek medical tradition on the Roman history of ocular treatments. It is also fair to argue that any research on names remains uncertain.

It seems that collyrium-stamp users did not only refer to the Greek medical tradition, but that they also used written and oral sources of various origins—sometimes non-medical; that the stone tablets served less as a means to spread knowledge than as a way to claim a specialist knowledge reserved to professionals; and, finally, that despite the information passed on in Celsus’ On Medicine (De medicina), Greek names for ocular ailments are rarely attested in Latin medical texts and on stone tablets.¹⁰ The study of the medicine names

---

⁴ Voinot (1999a). The collyrium-stamps cited in this paper are presented according to the numbers of this inventory, preceded by the abbreviation “V.”
⁵ Voinot (1999b).
⁷ For instance, the Y of the inscriptions engraved on V.14.
⁸ For instance V.260.
⁹ For instance V.85: HERASISTRATI (“of Erasistratus”) or V.229: HYGINI (“of Hyginus”).