Greek Medicine in Scribonius Largus’ Compositiones

Sergio Sconocchia

Abstract

Roman scientific and technical literature, considered in all its genres and forms, is a continuation and development of Hellenistic literature, so it would be more proper to refer to science of the Graeco-Roman period. The introduction of Greek medicine to the Roman world is not free of tensions and disputes (witness Cato and Pliny). Scribonius’ introductory Letter (Epistula), also called the Professio medici because of its substantial ethical content, including references to Hippocrates and Herophilus, is quite critical of a group of physicians who can be identified, through a rigorous analysis of some passages in Celsus and Scribonius, as the Methodists (Methodici). After some general reflections on Scribonius’ “Greek-coloured” Latin, this paper offers some suggestions on the text and interpretation of particular passages:

21 eiusdemque generis pigmentorum componuntur (“and they are composed of the same type of drugs”);
99 dicitur enim a quibusdam πικρά, quia amara est (“in fact some call it πικρά, that is “acrid,” because it is bitter”);
104 item lactucae, caules apio similis (“also lettuces, a cabbage similar to celery”);
182 gypso pota (“having drunk of plaster”);
183 <facit> uentris initio grauitatem, inflationem (“initially it <causes> heaviness of the belly, flatulence”) and 186 qui sumpserunt autem eius (“and those who partook of it”).

It is a truth universally acknowledged that from its earliest beginnings (with varying degrees of originality, depending on the genre) Latin literature was based and modelled itself upon the literature of the Greeks. If this is the case as regards the “high” literature, it is even more true of the scientific and technical output, which is almost always a continuation and development of Hellenistic works, so that one may well speak of the science of the Graeco-Roman age, and


※ Translated by Judy Moss, subsequently revised by Jon Wilcox. I must thank my friend and colleague K.-D. Fischer, who read the present article and provided me with some useful advice and bibliographical references. All translations from Greek and Latin are mine unless otherwise noted.
indeed the writings on certain subjects could more appropriately be described as literature in Latin rather than as Roman literature.\footnote{For some useful documentation, see Mastrorosa/Zumbo (eds.)/Santini (dir.) (2002). Radici Colace (p. 120) remarks: “Come quasi tutti i generi letterari, anche la letteratura astrologica a Roma si riconosce in modelli di scrittura greci”; cf. also Urso (2002). A similar dependence on Greek forms and paradigms is confirmed by Santini (2002: 161–162) as regards “Astronomia”: “Il debito nei confronti della scienza greca sembra davvero notevole”; by Stok (2002) for “Etnografia”; Prontera (2002) for “Geografia”; Argoud (2002) for “Idraulica”; and Fleury (2002) for “Meccanica.”}

The same applies to the relationship between Greek medicine and the medicine of the Roman age. The reception of the former was not always free from reservations and opposition: by way of example, we should recall the vehement disapproval of Cato (234–149 b.c. in his \textit{Books for My Son Marcus [Libri ad Marcum filium]}) and later on of Pliny. Despite these hostile attitudes, by means of an inexorable historical process, Greek medicine gained a foothold in Rome and gradually became established.\footnote{In a few bold pen strokes, Plin. \textit{Nat.} 29.12–13, gives Cassius Hemina's account of the arrival in Rome of the first Greek physician, Archagathus (\textit{uulnerarium eum fuisse a re dictum}) and describes Cato's vehement opposition to the Philhellenes (Plin. \textit{Nat.} 29.7–8); he then gives vent to his own scorn (Plin. \textit{Nat.} 29.18): \textit{Discunt periculis nostris, et experimentis per mortes agunt: medicoque tantum hominem occidisse impunitas summa est} (“It is at the expense of our perils that they learn, and they experiment by putting us to death, a physician being the only person that can kill another with sovereign impunity”).} The medical profession was not suited to all social classes, though (cf. Cic. \textit{Off.} 1.151), and from what Pliny says, was thought demeaning for the “Roman strictness” (\textit{Romana grauitas}).\footnote{Cf. Plin. \textit{Nat.} 29.17: \textit{Solam hanc artium Graecarum nondum exercet Romana grauitas; in tanto fructu paucissimi Quiritum occisae, et ipsi statim ad Graecos transfugae, . . . in hac artium sola euenit ut cuicunque medicum se professo statim credatur, cum sit periculum in nullo mendacio maius} (“Medicine is the only one of the arts of Greece that the Roman gravity has hitherto refused to cultivate: lucrative as it is, very few of our fellow-citizens have even attempted it, and as soon as they ever have done so, they have become deserters to the Greeks forthwith . . . this is the only one of the arts in which the moment a man declares himself to be an adept, he is at once believed, there being at the same time no imposture, the results of which are more fraught with peril”).} It was often perceived as being contrary to the Romans' nationalist feelings, also because the physicians, who were mostly Greek, used Greek terminology in the practice of their art.\footnote{Capitani (1975–1976); Mazzini (1978); De Meo (1983: 224–236). On medical Latin in general, see Langslow (2000).} From the second century b.c., then, the art of medicine in Rome was Greek in its doctrines, its language, its practitioners: suffice