CHAPTER 18

The Ancient Latin Commentary on the Hippocratic Aphorisms on the Threshold of the Twelfth Century

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Abstract

The oldest commentary on the Hippocratic Aphorisms was originally written in Latin around the time of Isidore of Seville and is part of the Alexandrian exegetic tradition. This paper studies the different ways this commentary has been disseminated since the beginning of the twelfth century. Based primarily—but not exclusively—on the preface to the text, two methods of revision, opposite to the tradition of the early Middle Ages, are noticed: (a) Some manuscripts contain an abridgment of the text, where some parts are deleted, especially the didactic ones; (b) other codices rewrite or enlarge the text. In the case of the preface, these additions refer to questions about the author of the treatise, the didactic method, and the division into parts. Different aspects of these additions to the preface suggest that they stem from a cultural environment corresponding to the beginning of the twelfth century.

Introduction

Since the middle of the eleventh century—and especially from the twelfth—one notices an expansion of medical studies due to the direct recovery of the Greek tradition and to the arrival of the rich Arab tradition thanks to the activity of translators. However, contrasting with the traditional point of view according to which the previous tradition had supposedly been abandoned, several researchers have recently focused on the possible presence at the

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beginning of the expansion of the Salernian school\(^1\) of a notable number of Latin medical texts from the early Middle Ages. One might say that these texts have been the object of several reworkings, whether on the level of content or of expression. Of course, those changes cannot be understood without reference to the period and cultural background in which they were made. Within this framework, I propose to explore the ways in which use was made of the oldest of the Latin commentaries on the Hippocratic Aphorisms (Lat A) as from the beginning of the twelfth century.

Let us remember, incidentally, that this commentary seems to have been written at about the time of Isidore of Seville and that it has its roots in the Alexandrian tradition of late antiquity.\(^2\) It is a kind of medical encyclopaedia, the contents of which has a fairly strong theoretical basis, notably from an etiological point of view. One may immediately state that this text is not a translation from Greek, although this does not mean that it is not rooted in the Byzantine exegetic tradition, judging from the expositive procedures and the parallelism with Greek commentaries, notably that of Stephanus of Athens. One aspect of this commentary worth scholarly attention is the extent of its manuscript tradition. Indeed, by contrast with the case of most Latin medical texts of late antiquity, Lat A has enjoyed an enormous circulation and the number of manuscripts that have transmitted it is quite high.\(^3\)

In the copies from the ninth and tenth centuries, the text maintains a fairly remarkable uniformity, but after the end of the eleventh century the manuscript tradition reveals several changes. It is on this point that I shall focus my analysis. With this purpose in mind, I shall refer to evidence from two manuscripts which transmit an abridged version of the text, and from three others which, by contrast, give an expanded version of it.\(^4\) Given the large amount of modification, I shall only cite a few specimens and, in the case of the expanded version, my study only refers to the preface. This preface raises some curious problems from a historical point of view: the attribution of the commentary to Oribasius, the explanatory method, and the distribution of stages in human

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1 This is not the moment for dwelling on the history of the Salernian school; I refer the reader to the classic study by Kristeller (1986); for a recent work, one can consult Jacquart/Paravicini Bagliani (eds.) (2007), a collective publication containing some papers that are very remarkable in many respects.

2 On this unpublished commentary, of which I am preparing an edition, one can consult Beccaria (1961); Fischer (2002); Vázquez Buján (2005).


4 The text of the expanded version is included in the edition of Winter of Andernach (1533). I shall not use as evidence this edition, which, incidentally, modifies to a very large extent the text of the manuscripts, even the most recent ones, notably at the lexical level.