CHAPTER 15

Case Histories in Late Byzantium: Reading the Patient in John Zacharias Aktouarios’ On Urines

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This paper provides the first analysis of case histories in the Byzantine period as they feature in the On Urines of John Zacharias Aktouarios (ca. 1275–ca. 1330). This group of clinical accounts is of special importance in that they have no counterpart in the Greek-speaking world since Galen. This study aims to illustrate various factors determining the patient’s response to the physician’s advice through close examination of John’s clinical narratives. The first part deals with the terminology that John uses to indicate the patient’s gender, age, social status, and clinical condition. The second part explores the significance of John’s acquaintance with the patients, the patient’s socio-economic background, and also the patient’s experience in connection with the physician’s professional expertise.

Byzantine medical literature remains largely unexplored. In particular, the medical literary output of the late Byzantine period (which dates roughly from the recapture of Constantinople from the Latins in 1261 up to its fall to the Turks in 1453) has been hardly studied by modern scholars, not least due to lack of modern critical editions of the texts. And yet, in this late period there is a flourishing of notable medical authors such as Nicholas Myrepsos and

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1 I use the term ‘Byzantine medical literature’ to refer to the medical works produced in the Byzantine Empire from the transfer of the capital from Rome to Constantinople in AD 330 until the fall of the city to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. We may divide this literary output into two main phases: a) the early Byzantine phase covering the first centuries up to the Arab invasion of Alexandria in 642; and b) the subsequent centuries, including the period where the focus of scholarly activity moved to Constantinople. Cf. Temkin, O. (1962), ‘Byzantine medicine: Tradition and empiricism’, Dumbarton Oaks Papers 16, 97–115.
John Zacharias Aktouarios, as well as a vast number of usually anonymous collections of recipes (the so-called iatrosophia) and a considerable number of Arabic medical texts in Greek translation.²

Out of this rich medical production, I have chosen to focus on John Zacharias Aktouarios, as I consider him an exceptional case for making a conscious effort in his writings to connect theory with practice. In his extensive work On Urines, John deems it necessary to substantiate his material with detailed reports of his medical visits, thus providing a vivid image of contemporary daily contact with his patients.³ John plays a dual role in presenting his clinical accounts; he is both a practising physician, and thus a central character in the story, and a ‘chronicler’, i.e. he constructs a narrative based on the patient’s history and the physician’s performance. In this chapter, I would like to examine how John represents his patients by considering various factors such as the terminology used and the patients’ response. My purpose is neither to offer a retrospective diagnosis of the illnesses that troubled John’s patients nor to evaluate his prognoses or the efficacy of his therapeutic methods. Rather, I would like to explore the narrative patterns that shape the patient’s portrait and his or her relationship with the physician. Since these particular accounts have never been examined before, the first part of this chapter discusses the identity of the sufferer and the place of the case histories in John’s work, while the second part focuses on examples of patients’ representation.


³ I am aware that by focusing on the construction of the patient in the case histories, I omit not only the representation of the physician, but also a further level of discussion, which would include various rhetorical devices used by John to attract the readers’ attention and communicate his experiences to them. For these topics and their connection to the particular role of place and time in John’s narrative, see Bouras-Vallianatos, P. (2015). Medical Theory and Practice in Late Byzantium: The Case of John Zacharias Aktouarios (ca. 1275–ca. 1330), 113–59.