Aelius Aristides as Informed Patient and Physician

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Aelius Aristides, one of the most renowned orators of the so-called second sophistic, has often been thought of as the paradigmatic patient who surrendered his physical and psychological health to Asclepius, and spent a large part of his life in the temple of the god at Pergamum blindly following divine orders on diet and regimen. This study looks at the Hieroi Logoi as an illness narrative and argues against such a simplistic view and in favour of a more complex picture: Aristides is a far cry far from the submissive patient, who idly resided in the Pergamene Asclepieion relying exclusively on the therapeutic powers of the god and his human helpers. In fact, through a close reading of a selection of passages from the Hieroi Logoi a whole new image of Aristides emerges: the informed patient who is not only in possession of the basics of the medical discourse but who also functions as a physician of sorts, taking both his own life and the lives of others into his hands. This new type of patient, the knowledgeable patient, who is well-versed in medical matters and envisages himself as an active agent of the healing process and an equally important partner in the medical encounter, ties well with other testimonies we have about knowledgeable patients mostly to be found amongst the members of the socio-political elite of the time.

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A volume devoted to the patient in the ancient world could not do without a chapter on Publius Aelius Aristides Theodoros, one of the most conspicuous patients of antiquity, and his Hieroi Logoi (henceforth HL), his ‘Sacred Discourses’. Within the last decade or so, Aristides and his HL—a unique first-person narrative of aretalogical nature that relates his life-long battle with illness and his intimate relationship with the god Asclepius—have received much attention from specialists working on both history of religion and history of medicine.1 The HL are no longer thought of as the delirious account of an incurable hypochondriac; instead, they are considered to be a rare first-person illness narrative, which, while being extremely elaborate and self-conscious, offers a unique insight into the religious, medical and cultural life of the second century AD.2
