CHAPTER 10

Regimen in the Hippocratic Corpus: Diaita and Its Problems

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In Greek literature of the Classical period prior to the philosophers Plato and Aristotle, comedy, reflecting as it does ordinary life, offers a particularly rich source of evidence concerning dietary practices. The historians Herodotus and Thucydides, and later Xenophon, also provide evidence, in passing, about the regimen of both individuals and societies. But medical literature is the most important source we possess in regard to Greek regimen of the Classical period, both for people in good health and for those who are ill. Indeed, it is in the corpus of sixty or so medical treatises attributed to Hippocrates, an important part of which dates from the second half of the 5th and the first half of the 4th centuries, that the Greek word for regimen, δίαιτα, occurs most frequently. It is first attested in the 6th century in the lyric poetry of Alcaeus (once), then at the beginning of the 5th century in the lyric poetry of Pindar (on two occasions), and in the tragedies of Aeschylus (once). It continues to be attested in the second half of the 5th century in both tragedy and comedy, although without much of an increase in frequency: Sophocles (three instances), Euripides (five), and a mere seven times in Aristophanes, even though comedy provides detailed evidence concerning dietary regimen. It is with the historians that the term first begins to take on serious importance, particularly in the Ionic prose of Herodotus (where it occurs 19 times), rather more so than in the case of Thucydides (10 times). Yet even if one adds the twenty or so occurrences

1 Alcaeus 61.12; Pindar, Ol. 2.65, and P. 1.93; Aeschylus, Pr. 490 (cf. Pers. 41).
2 Sophocles, El. 1073; oc 352, 751; Euripides Fr. 21.4, 812.6 (sing); 525.5, 759.2, 917.2 (pl.); Aristophanes, Vesp. 624; Eccl. 673, 1103, 1112; Pax 572; Av. 413; Ran. 114 (pl.).
3 For Herodotus, see Powell 1938/1960, s.v. δίαιτα. He distinguishes 3 senses: – 1. (6) dwell (δίαιταν ἔχειν): 1.36.1; 136.2; also δ. ποιέεσθαι 2.68.4; 3.51.2; 5.49.7; but set to dwell 2.2.5
2. (11) way of life: 1.157.2; 202.2; 215.1; 2.36.2 bis; 3.102.1; 4.78.3; 7.8.4; 95.2; 109.1; 116.2
3. (2) diet: 3.23.1 and perh. 9. 82.3.
4 For Thucydides, see Betant 1843/1961, s.v. δίαιτα where the ten occurrences are collected under four headings: 
in Xenophon,\(^5\) there is simply no comparison with the Ch, where the occurrences of the term are numbered in the hundreds, (slightly more than two hundred in fact).\(^6\) Moreover, the substantive δίαιτα, which appears only relatively late in Greek (it is not attested before the 6th century BC), underwent an unprecedented increase in occurrences as a result of this earliest surviving medical literature. These simple statistical facts demonstrate that what we call dietics is at the heart of the thought of the medical writers, or at any rate of some them.

In fact the historian of nutrition can mine a rich seam of information from these earliest doctors. Theirs is the first body of work in Greece to provide detailed lists of foodstuffs and their different natural and artificial properties. The catalogue contained in the treatise aptly named Regimen offers the fullest and most complete example.\(^7\) It goes through, in a logical order, the properties of cereals, of meat and poultry, of fish, of vegetables, and of fruits. From among a mass of information concerning foodstuffs, their preparation and manner of preservation, we discover that Greeks ate dogs, foxes and hedgehogs.\(^8\)

But the principal originality of these doctors is not simply a matter of their having systematized these inventories of foods prior to Aristotle's classifications. It consists rather in their having investigated, for the first time in the history of Greek thought, the concept of regimen (δίαιτα).\(^9\) For this reason I have

\(^5\) For Xenophon, I have not thought it worthwhile to list the vague differences in meaning identified by the Lexicon Xenophonteum of F.G. Sturz. Here are the attestations: Mem. 1.2.5; 1.3.3; 1.3.5; 1.6.5; 1.6.9; 2.1.16; Econ. 2.8.4; 7.19.5; Cyr. 1.2.16 (ter); 1.3.2 (pl.); 7.5.6; 8.1.9; 8.2.6; 8.2.24; 8.4.2; 8.6.22; Lac. 5.1.2.


\(^9\) In spite of the importance of the concept of δίαιτα, studies devoted to its vocabulary are rare. See Laín Entralgo 1987, 485–497: one may take issue with the first section, on the original sense of the word δίαιτα, insofar as it seeks to reconstruct, without textual support, an archaic δίαιτα which relates to the concepts of the microcosm and of catharsis (purification), and then a transition from the archaic concept of δίαιτα to a rationalized one by way of the Presocratic philosophers. Cf. Wöhrle 1990, 31–35 (Zum Begriff δίαιτα), in addition to the study of Laín Entralgo. See also Thivel 2000, 25–37: Thivel's study is more philological than.