CHAPTER 11

Towards a Hippocratic Anthropology: On Ancient Medicine and the Origins of Humans

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The Hippocratic On Ancient Medicine (VM) is one of the earliest treatises in the corpus and, as such, offers a valuable glimpse at an otherwise poorly documented period of intellectual history. What makes this text so intriguing is that, on the one hand, it sits comfortably within the familiar philosophical and scientific debates of late fifth-century Greece, but, on the other, offers what seem to be idiosyncratic approaches to them. At its most fundamental level, On Ancient Medicine offers a polemic against speculative philosophy that relies on ‘newfangled hypothesis’\(^1\) (καινὴ υπόθεσις at 1.3) to account for disease and formulate treatment, and argues for a method that instead combines empirical research and analogical reasoning. What is distinct about the work, however, is the author’s focus on food and dietary regimen as the foundation of medical τέχνη and the steps in his thinking that lead him to this position. To reach this conclusion, the author deploys in a famous section of the work (ch. 3) his own form of hypothesizing about the condition of the human species in an imagined prehistorical state of primitivity.

That chapter is, in part, a self-promotional argument for the antiquity and validity of medicine as a τέχνη, but it also deserves a place, as many have observed, alongside other works of the period that took an interest in what we would call cultural anthropology. It would serve the theme of this volume well if I could argue that On Ancient Medicine’s particular foray into cultural anthropology was distinctly ‘Hippocratic’, and that any ancient doctor aligning himself with Hippocratic medicine would have been familiar with, and sympathetic to, On Ancient Medicine’s anthropological explanation of the origins of medicine. In fact, however, the available evidence does not allow us to say much

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\(^1\) Schiefsky’s translation; see Schiefsky 2005, 111–15. For the meaning of ‘hypothesis’ Schiefsky argues for ‘basis’ or ‘foundation’ as preferable to the traditional ‘postulate’. On the reading of καινή, see Jouanna 1990 [2003], 157–58, and Schiefsky 2005, 135–36. See also Lloyd 1991, 49–69. Throughout this chapter Jouanna’s and Schiefsky’s editions of VM will be cited by last name only. Greek text is quoted from Jouanna’s edition, English translations throughout are based on Schiefsky, with occasional modification.
about that idea one way or another. If anything, it might make more sense to claim that an interest in cultural anthropology was decidedly un-Hippocratic, and that when it came to On Ancient Medicine’s particular anthropological take on the evolution of medicine, its author was something of a Hippocratic outlier. If the authors we now regard as ‘Hippocratic’ were not actively opposed to anthropological theorizing, they were for the most part indifferent to it, at least to theorizing that was not directly relevant to medical praxis.²

I am less concerned, however, with what is (or is not) Hippocratic about an interest in anthropology in general, but rather what this particular example of anthropological thinking in On Ancient Medicine might have to tell us about Hippocratic medicine, especially its philosophical and methodological underpinnings, and whether the premises that inform the author’s very distinctive narrative of human origins might indicate something we might conceptualize as specifically ‘Hippocratic’. In what follows I will suggest that what marks this work as particularly Hippocratic is the way in which it combines a pervasively negative conception of human nature—humans as essentially abject, weak creatures, inferior in many ways to animals, and in a state that has changed little since even the most primitive times—with a positive belief in the efficacy of medical τέχνη. Indeed, as I will argue, On Ancient Medicine’s persistent plea for medicine to be taken seriously as a τέχνη, and as a τέχνη with a history as old as the human species itself, stems from its assumption that human φύσις is essentially a steady state of misery, with little hope of biological or physical progress without the intervention of human reason. Medicine, on this conception, becomes an almost heroic struggle against an inherently flawed physical machine. In the end, it may be impossible to say whether this notion was in itself distinctively Hippocratic—a pessimistic view of human nature, after all, is a familiar enough thread in archaic and classical Greek literature—but what does seem to be Hippocratic about On Ancient Medicine, as I hope to show, is the way in which it situates the etiology of disease within a progressivist narrative of investigation and discovery (εὕρημα), itself in continual tension with an anti-progressivist view of human biological φύσις. At the end of the chapter, I offer some observations on how Galen seems to have absorbed such an

² See Jouanna, 1999 278, in reference to Carn., another work that professes an interest in human origins: ‘the author…has no interest in discussing cosmology for its own sake, but wishes only to briefly establish those elements involved in the formation of the universe that are necessary for the purposes of anthropology’. Carn., however has a far more extensive interest in the material origins of humans than the author of VM has any patience for; see next note.