How Popular Were the Medical Sects?

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This paper will explore the extent to which the ancient medical haireseis, or ‘sects’ as they are conventionally called, might be considered popular.\(^1\) I shall not be concerned with the popularity of sect medicine in the sense that it may have been developed among or practised by ordinary members of the general population. The members of medical sects were uncontroversially seen, and advertised themselves, as representing a specialised class of dedicated healer, as iatroi or medici. There are well known problems of definition in speaking of a medical profession as such in Graeco-Roman antiquity, but if we may speak of one, then it will have been populated pre-eminently by sectarian doctors.\(^2\) Nor shall I be interested directly in the popularity of sectarian doctors in terms of their fame or celebrity status, though, as we shall see below, certain physicians such as Thessalus of Tralles could be compared with actors or chariot-drivers with regard to their popular following. I shall be concerned instead with the question of how accessible sect medicine may have been to different sections of the population. I aim to explore in particular how widely diffused sect medicine was in the ancient world, and whether it was perceived as being generally available to patients from a variety of levels in society. From a modern perspective, the healthcare provided by the medical sects often seems to be viewed in opposition to general notions of ‘popular medicine’, sometimes in connection with contrasts between ‘high’ and ‘low’ medicine. While such contrasts are certainly useful, particularly in regard to the approach of the healers concerned, I want to suggest here that in terms of the social status of their patients, sectarian doctors may have treated a less restricted range of the population

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1 For the general character of an ancient medical sect, I refer to the remarks of von Staden 1982, 79–80: ‘the evidence suggests that a group with fairly coherent and distinctive theories, with an acknowledged founder (hairesi-archēs), and with publicly identifiable leaders who articulate (a) their rejection of rival theories through theoretically founded polemics, as well as (b) their own systematic alternatives, would qualify as a hairesis’.

2 On the difficulties in defining and distinguishing types of healer in the ancient world, see recently Nutton 2013, 177, 254–278. Cf. Lang 2013, 243–266, on the exclusivity of sect medicine in Ptolemaic Alexandria in comparison with other healing traditions.
than is often supposed, potentially overlapping to a considerable degree with the recipients of more familiar forms of popular healing.

Of course, the ancient medical sects undoubtedly represented a highly theoretical, philosophically informed approach to medicine. The prominent members of the Herophilean sect, or the Empiricist, Methodist, Pneumatist, and so on, were well educated and cultured individuals. Those we hear of, that is, the individuals named in our sources, were certainly among the most successful physicians in antiquity, and included not only the founders of the various medical sects, but also their followers who made some kind of impact on medicine or on history in general. These individuals tended to cluster around the major centres of medicine, such as Alexandria, Rome, and the various cities of Asia Minor, and they often had direct links with the ruling classes, notably the Hellenistic monarchs or the Imperial family. The sophistication of their medical theories, and the markedly elite status of those with whom they are found associating, have combined to create the strong impression among modern scholars that sect medicine was essentially the preserve of the privileged.

We hear about the members of medical sects for two principal reasons: firstly, as authors of medical books which had some lasting influence; and secondly, because of their connections with famous individuals, for example as personal doctors to important historical figures (such as the Herophilean Andreas, who was doctor to Ptolemy IV Philopator, or the Asclepiadeans Marcus Artorius and Antonius Musa, both of whom allegedly saved the life of Augustus). Hence, in many cases, we hear about these physicians only because they associated with the elite. Similarly, it is not surprising that the

3 By the Roman period, it had become conventional in writing about the history of medicine to arrange the sects into three major groups, the Rationalists/Dogmatists, the Empiricists, and the Methodists. The Rationalist ‘sect’, however, was in fact a category invented by the Empiricists, comprising a variety of competing sects, united only by their general commitment to the need to discover the hidden causes of disease. The most successful Rationalist sects were the Herophileans, Erasistrateans, Asclepiadeans, and Pneumatists, though as we shall see below there were many less well known individuals who established their own sects as well. On these issues, and on the early application of the term ‘hairesis’ to these groupings of doctors, see von Staden 1982.

4 The evidence for the ancient medical sects has been gathered in a number of fragment collections: for Herophilus and the Herophilean sect, see von Staden 1989; for the Empiricists, Deichgräber 1965; and for the Methodists, Tecusan 2004. Garofalo 1988 focuses on Erasistratus himself, and less on the later fortunes of his sect. The Pneumatist sect is the subject of the still fundamental study by Wellmann 1895.

5 For Andreas and Ptolemy IV Philopator, see Polybius 5.81.1–7. For Marcus Artorius and Antonius Musa, see below.