‘Choose your master well’
Medical training, testimonies and claims to authority

Natacha Massar

Summary

This paper explores the ways in which a doctor could use his master’s name to enhance his authority and back his claims to being a qualified physician. This is looked at mainly in two contexts: when applying for the position of public physician, and in medical treatises. I argue that the influence of teachers was widely recognised in Greek society. This meant that using the name of one’s master to defend one’s skills was accepted by both colleagues and laymen and could therefore be used in very different contexts. Sometimes this argument had to be confirmed by witnesses, in which case fellow-pupils or patients treated during a pupil’s apprenticeship could come in useful.

Introduction

The lack of official training and of diplomas in Antiquity has often been pointed out: this basic fact had effects on many areas of a doctor’s professional life. Some common Greek medical practices, such as prognosis, seem to have been developed in this context, as they were impressive and awe inspiring. A doctor’s reputation was extremely important; how persuasive and confidence inspiring he was could have an essential influence on the development of his career.

Medicine was a very public trade and those a doctor had to persuade were generally laymen. In order to be effective, he should therefore use arguments whose validity was widely acknowledged. Several scholars have underlined that being associated with a known doctor, e.g. because he was your master, was a means to acquire authority.¹ An anecdote told by Celsus illustrates this point. In a passage about

hydropisie, he tells a story about the comparative merits of two doctors at the court of Antigonus Gonatas, who were treating a patient suffering from this illness. He starts out by naming one of the physicians – his name has been lost – and immediately adds ‘a not undistinguished physician, the student of Chrysippus of Cnidus’ (non ignobilis medicus, Chrysippi discipulus).\(^2\) He then goes on to tell how this doctor, who has long been identified as Aristogenes of Thasos, proves his superior skills by making a prognostic which turns out true (the death of the patient), contrary to his colleague Philippus of Epirus. In this short text, Aristogenes’ teacher is mentioned twice, and Philippus’ never. Two features define the better doctor: his master’s name and his prognostic skills.

I would argue that the training period could serve a young doctor well: not least because being associated with a well known physician, your master, was an accepted argument to defend your qualifications. In this paper, I would like to explore various aspects of a young doctor’s training that could have a bearing on his career, and the means by which he could enhance his chances. I will start out with a very concrete situation in which the doctor interacted mainly with laymen: the appointment of a public physician. I will then look at the training period itself (excluding the medical aspects), and finally examine the use of this argument – i.e. being the pupil of a famous master – in a more strictly medical context. To narrow down the material, I will focus on the fourth century and the Hellenistic period (third-first century BC): although most treatises of this period have been lost, many excerpts of Hellenistic doctors’ writings were preserved in later authors (Galen, Soranus, Celsus, Pliny the Elder, etc.). Quite a lot of information on public physicians can be found in honorific decrees, dating mainly from the fourth to the early first century BC, several dozen of which have been found all over the Greek world.

The master’s name, proof of competence

The Greeks recognised that teachers, especially at a higher level of education, had a strong and defining influence on those they taught. The master’s role was particularly emphasised in the case of people trained in a technical skill, whether as a means to further their education or to actually become a professional. This widely

\(^2\) Cels. 3.21.3.