III. Teaching of surgery and obstetrics
The Teaching of Surgery

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Summary

In the first part of the paper, the widespread and enduring tradition that Asclepius was taught medicine by Chiron, with whom he had a quasi-filial relationship, is examined. In the second part, on the basis of language used by the Hippocratic writers, especially in the deontological and surgical works, some deductions are made about methods of and attitudes to teaching and learning. The nature of Hippocratic surgery is discussed and two types of surgical treatise are distinguished. Finally, these questions are addressed: who wrote and for whom; why, when and where?

Fons et origo

For the Greeks, the quest for a πρώτος εὑρετής, ‘first discoverer’ or ‘inventor’ was a common intellectual pursuit, and it was common to classify thinkers in master-pupil relationships. Traditions of Chiron the centaur, just and wise culture-hero and educator, can be related to these twin tendencies. Such traditions begin early and are enduring. Chiron was first to teach not only medicine but many other technai also (discussed below); it seems likely that the name Chiron stems from root χεῖρ ‘hand’. That χειρουργία ‘hand-work’ came to have the specific meaning ‘surgery’ indicates a view of medical practice as technê par excellence deeply embedded in Greek thought patterns, indeed in the language itself.¹

¹ Among medical words of the same root, the verb χειρίζειν was widely used, especially of surgery but also of medical practice more generally; the substantive χειροτέχνης was a neologism, reflecting self-consciousness in the developing technê of medicine (Hipp. VM 1.7 [1.570 L., 584 L.]; Aff. 1.45 [6.208 L.; 254 L.]).