Teaching Surgery in Late Byzantine Alexandria

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Summary

When one examines Alexandrian commentaries on works of Galen and Hippocrates, disclosed are essential guides to the Art of Medicine as practiced in the late fifth, sixth, and early seventh centuries. These are outlines and contents of a ‘medical curriculum’ in late Byzantine Alexandria, as well as Ravenna, and thanks to the patient and skilled labors of Dickson,\(^1\) Duffy,\(^2\) Irmer,\(^3\) Palmieri,\(^4\) Pritchet,\(^5\) Westerink,\(^6\) and others, following and building on the pioneering studies of Bräutigam,\(^7\) Meyerhoff,\(^8\) and Temkin,\(^9\) medical historians can now peruse carefully edited Greek and Latin texts and generally reliable translations of some commentaries by Agnellus of Ravenna, John of Alexandria, Palladius, and Stephanus of Athens. Deeply experienced medical practitioners became teachers of would-be medical students in Alexandria and Ravenna. Alexandria had long functioned as a city reputed to be the home of medical instruction,\(^10\) and by \textit{ca.} 550 or slightly later, teachers began to produce commentaries on the classic texts of Greek and Roman medicine, with Galen and Hippocrates as major authorities. Underpinning what the medical professors set down in their commentaries were extended lives spent in the actual practice of medicine, sometimes as military physicians (as may have been the case of Paul of Aegina in the early seventh century), sometimes as doctors who had gained lengthy experience in Alexandria itself, and sometimes as medical professionals who had emigrated to Egypt after successful careers in another part of the Greek-speaking eastern Roman

\(^{1}\) Dickson (1998).

\(^{2}\) Duffy (1983) and with others (1997).

\(^{3}\) Irmer (1977).

\(^{4}\) Palmieri (2005).

\(^{5}\) Pritchet (1975) and (1982).

\(^{6}\) Westerink and others (1981) and (1985-1995).

\(^{7}\) Bräutigam (1908).

\(^{8}\) Meyerhoff (1930), (1931) and (1933).

\(^{9}\) Temkin (1932), (1935; repr. 1977) and with reassessments (1991).

Empire. Reflecting time as a medical student and later career in Constantinople, Aetius of Amida’s *Tetrabiblon* foreshadows editorial mechanics and techniques of textual exegesis as they emerge more clearly with the medical commentators after 550. It may well be that Stephanus, ‘the Philosopher and Physician’, was originally from Athens, but whether he was or not, the attribution of an Athenian background suggests that non-Alexandrian physicians either were recruited or that the growing fame of medical instruction attracted accomplished personnel from other cities and provinces of the Empire.

*Aetius of Amida as medical student*

Alexandria drew many students to study medicine in this era, and Aetius of Amida (*fl. as a royal physician in the reign of Justinian*, likely one of the personal physicians to Theodora), is a famous example of such medical apprentices and trainees who had been students at Alexandria, in the early decades of the sixth century. And through Aetius’ extensive *Tetrabiblon*, one gains a good notion of medical subjects taught and authorities employed. Not only were the Galenic writings available for study and commentary, but also there were circulating texts of Antyllus the Surgeon, another surgeon

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14 Gurlt (1898) 1, 474-484, remains the most comprehensive account. Antyllus prob. *fl.ca.* 200-240 AD, since he postdates Galen and predates Oribasius. Aetius has before him texts of Antyllus’ *Head Wounds*, as well as *Collyrium, Tablet, and Pessary* (Τὸ κολλόριον, ὁ τροχίκος, ὁ πεσσός) accompanied by *Injection/Extraction with Uterine Syringe/Bellows* (ὁ ἐγκματισμός, τὸ φυσάρι, ὁ μητρεχύτης) among a number of procedures quite separately from those found in Oribasius. Gurlt (1898) 1, 475-477 (citing texts edited by Lewy in *Janus* 2 [1847], and 3 [1848]).