Medical Education in Late Antiquity
From Alexandria to Montpellier

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Summary

The training of medical students reflects current medical trends and has grave repercussions on the future development of the medical art. This is as true today as it was in Antiquity. There was, however, one period and place at the crossroads of civilisations and cultures in which the educational trends were to have a particularly important influence on how medicine evolved. This was Alexandria in Late Antiquity. In a climate where medicine and philosophy were heavily intertwined, teachers used formal philosophical concepts in order to organise medical knowledge. Their educational techniques provided the tools with which Islamic authors during the medieval period such as Avicenna (Ibn Sinâ, d. 1037) arranged their great medical encyclopaedias. These works in Latin translation later became the core curriculum in the nascent universities of Europe.

The ‘school’ of Alexandria

From its foundation in 332 BC, Alexandria has always been at the forefront of medical science. It was here that the two greatest anatomists of Antiquity, Herophilus and Erasistratus, made their ground-breaking discoveries, and here that the most influential physician, Galen (d. 216/17), had come to study. The city also boasted the famous Alexandrian library, the greatest in the world at the time, which fostered the study of the classics and provided a forum for intellectual exchange. It and its successor institutions were, however,
destroyed over the course of history, the burning of the Serapeion in 391 AD marking the end of this great tradition. In this context, scholars have often talked of intellectual and political decline in the late antique world, explaining it, as Edward Gibbon (d. 1794) did, with the spread of Christianity. Whatever one may think about this subject in general, Alexandria certainly did not conform to this image of collapse and degeneration.

Because of its great fame, Alexandria quickly became the stuff of myths. For instance, as regards medicine, some scholars, especially in the French world, have talked about a ‘first’ and ‘second School of Alexandria (première/deuxième École d’Alexandrie)’, the first having flourished in the third century BC, and the second in the sixth and seventh centuries AD. In this, of course, they follow later medical historiography, for instance, in the Arabic Middle Ages, which depicts Herophilus and Erasistratus as colleagues, or as pupil and teacher. Yet, as far as we know, in third-century-BC Alexandria, there was no single school of medicine, but rather competing physicians who enjoyed royal patronage and worked in extremely favourable conditions. Likewise, there was no single ‘School of Alexandria’ in the sixth or seventh century. Rather, we find certain intellectual trends, especially in philosophy and medicine.

An important number of philosophers studied or taught in late antique Alexandria. The debates of this time were characterised by a conflict between pagan philosophy and monotheistic beliefs. Scholars such as Ammonius (fl. 510s–20s) composed commentaries on the works of Aristotle and Plato. In these writings, the authors tried to reconcile Peripatetic and Neo-Platonic ideas. Whilst some philosophers remained within the framework of pagan Antiquity, other authors clearly defended monotheistic positions. For instance, the Christian philosopher and Ammonius’ pupil John Philoponus, called ‘the Grammarian (al-Naḥwī)’ in Arabic, took Aristotle and Proclus to task for thinking that the world was eternal and therefore uncreated; rather, he argued – by employing philosophical reasoning, but in keeping with the creationist accounts in Genesis – that the cosmos had a beginning.

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4 Gibbon (1776–1788); for a recent and refreshing view on this topic, see Ward-Perkins (2005).
7 An excellent overview of the philosophical debates in the late antique commentaries is provided in Sorabji (2004); see also the recent Baltussen (2008).