MEDICAL THEORY IN HERACLIDES OF PONTUS

BY

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The physician and medical scientist Asclepiades of Bithynia 1) was distinguished by two qualities not invariably found in the history of Greek medicine: compassion and commonsense 2). He avoided the drastic remedies fashionable among his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, and thereby earned himself an unmerited reputation for charlatanism: this hostile tradition is reflected in the confused and unreliable report given by the Elder Pliny 3). Asclepiades was a man of some originality in the theory as well as in the practice of medicine; in founding his theories upon a broad scientific view of the universe, he brought medical science back, after the lapse of over a century, to that fruitful marriage of philosophy and medicine which belongs to the best tradition of Greek medical theory.

The scientific system which Asclepiades chose was atomistic, or rather corpuscular. Although he is sometimes described as an Epicurean, his system was not that of Epicurus, but the doctrine of

1) Asclepiades has not been properly collected since the work of G. Gumpert, Asclepiadis Bithyni Fragmenta (Weimar 1794). Apart from the essay by Ant. Cocchi, Discorsi e Lettere (Milano 1824), Lasswitz on Daniel Sennert in Vierteljahresschr. f. wiss. Philos. 3 (1879), 408 ff., and Bruns, Quaestiones Asclepiadeae (Rost. Diss. 1884), see in particular M. Wellmann in Susemihl's Alex. Lit.-Gesch. II, 430 ff.; in R.E. s.v. Asklepiades; and in N.Jbb. 1908, 684-703; Zeller III4, 1,569 ff. There is a Bericht 1901-10 by Susemihl in Bursian CLVIII, 159-164; and the articles by W. A. Heidel, The of Heraclides and Asclepiades, TAPA 40 (1910), 5-21, and R. A. Fritzsche, Der Magnet und die Atmung in antiker Theorie, Rh.M. 57 (1902), 363-391, are of prime importance. C. Allbutt, Greek Medicine at Rome (London 1921), 176 ff. gives a full and sympathetic treatment. I have not seen R. M. Green, Asclepiades: His Life and Writings (New Haven 1955), which is a translation of Gumpert's fragments and Cocchi's essay.

2) Cf. Celsus II 4, p. 78: Asclepiades officium esse medici dicit, ut tuto, ut celeriter, ut iucunde curet.

which had been held by the fourth-century philosopher Heraclides of Pontus, with whom Asclepiades is linked in the doxographic tradition). The striking feature of this theory, in which it is distinguished from the atomism of Democritus and Epicurus, is that the particles are not indivisible but can be pulverized into fragments, which then re-unite in other combinations). The place of void in the theory of Epicurus is taken by a system of invisible pores, which are λόγω θεωρητοί, apprehended by reason alone.

It is clear from the evidence that this theory was no vague fantasy, a mere scientific facade for medical theories to which it bore no real relation: here too Asclepiades is free from the charge of charlatanism. It was on the contrary carefully thought out and applied in detail to physiology and pathology. Asclepiades used it as a cardinal principle in the explanation of disease: according to him, disease is caused when the free movement of bodily ingredients, blood, πνεύμα, and the humours, is hindered by an obstruction of particles, ἐνστασις δρχων, “statio corpusculorum” 4). The causes and the specific varieties of fever are referred to this obstruction 5); it is the cause of a number of acute ailments 6); and by it Asclepiades explained the sensation of pain, in which explanation he appears to have made use of the frangibility of the particles 7).

There are a number of ingredients in this theory, and one must be careful to sort out what is distinctive and peculiar in it from what is common to Greek medical theory in general and to Alexandrian

2) F. Wehrli, Herakleides Pontikos (Basel 1953), Fr. 119ab, 120.
3) See the description in Caelius Aurelianus De Morbis Acutis I 14, 105 ff., which is no doubt somewhat distorted by Epicurean interpretation (cf. Heidel, op. cit.).
7) Cael. Aurel. I 14, 119, where pain is referred to the size of the particles. Galen X 852 also adds their frangibility.