

Introduction

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The study of ancient medicine is not be limited to strictly medical aspects. In ancient times, health and treatment were linked to mythical, religious and philosophical thinking. Reflections on what is good for the soul and how to live a good life were also important in understanding human health. These important aspects of the perception of the human condition and health accompany medical research.

We are therefore dealing with a wide range of issues, the significance of which and their often difficult-to-explain interrelationships have to be taken into account. This broad spectrum of issues – with strictly medical aspects naturally given primary importance – is presented in this volume, which brings together scientific articles resulting from two international conferences: Ancient Medicine and Philosophy: Visions of the Good Life in Antiquity (Łódź, 18–19 May 2022) and Health and Disease from Hippocrates to Byzantium (Palermo, 12–14 October 2022).

As for the contents of the volume, it opens with a contribution by Florian Steger, who provides a detailed overview of the historical and religious origins of the cult of Asclepius, its dissemination between the 5th and 3rd centuries BCE, and the complex interweaving of therapeutic practices and temple medicine. This article examines the origins, evolution, and sociocultural significance of Asclepius, exploring his transformation from a mortal physician in Homeric literature to the central deity of a healing cult that proliferated throughout the Mediterranean and into Roman society. It analyzes primary textual sources such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to establish the early rational dimension of Greek medicine associated with Asclepius and his descendants, tracing their legacy through epic poetry and archaeological evidence. The study highlights key phases in the divinization of Asclepius, emphasizing Pindar's philosophical reflections on the limits of medicine and the interplay between divine intervention and human endeavor. The paper documents the development of sanctuaries (Asclepieia), rituals practised by the cult (notably healing sleep/incubation), and the tension between miraculous cures and practical treatments, as evidenced by epigraphic miracle reports (*Iamata*), literary epigrams, and healing narratives. The spread of the Asclepius cult from Greece to Rome is detailed through historical accounts, demonstrating its en-

during appeal and adaptation in response to epidemics and social crises. The article ultimately argues that Asclepian medicine represents a unique synthesis of religion, ritual, and medical practice, offering an ancient paradigm of pluralistic health care that influenced both ancient and modern therapeutic traditions.

From myth, the volume moves – through the essay by Zbigniew Nerczuk – to an exploration of the role of the sophist, examined in stark contrast to recent scholarly trends, through a holistic lens: not merely as a rhetorician and politician, but as a well-rounded intellectual figure endowed with a specific art (*technē*). In his contribution Nerczuk examines the interplay between the Sophists and early Greek medicine, challenging traditional disciplinary boundaries and highlighting the interdisciplinary character of fifth-century BCE intellectual life. By analyzing the philosophical, anthropological, and medical concerns within both the Sophistic movement and the Hippocratic Corpus, the study reveals extensive mutual influences between these domains. The text contends that the rigid separation of philosophy and medicine – often rooted in later frameworks such as those imposed by Hegel – distorts the understanding of early Greek thought. Instead, it demonstrates that the Sophists and physicians alike engaged in shared inquiries into nature, human biology, cognition, psychology, and the art of healing both body and soul. Drawing on sources from Plato, Hippocrates, and other contemporaries, the article traces how concepts such as *technē* (craft), *logos* (discourse), and the relationship between rhetoric and healing were developed and debated. The author ultimately advocates for a holistic approach to early Greek intellectual history, one that recognizes the integrated, overlapping, and cooperative pursuits of knowledge across philosophy and medicine. The main thesis of the text is that early Greek thought – especially as exemplified by the Sophistic movement – should be interpreted holistically, as the boundaries separating philosophy, medicine, and related sciences were fluid and artificial.

Adopting a more strictly historical-medical perspective, Franco Giorgianni's study examines the nosological and nosographic concepts set out in Book I of Hippocrates' *Diseases* (*De morbis I*), contextualising them within their unique textual and manuscript tradition. Through critical textual analysis and comparison with other Hippocratic works, the study reveals how the treatise uses humoral theory, focusing primarily on bile and phlegm, alongside consideration of external factors such as climate and physical exertion, to explain the origins and progression of disease. The author describes *De morbis I* as a didactic text that provides a systematic classification and terminology for diseases. The author also focuses on the dynamic and ever-changing nature of physiopathological processes, which are characterised as a 'theatre of humours'. The innovation lies in its detailed attention to individual constitutions and environmental factors, as well as its integration of theory and practice. Overall, this treatise represents a pivotal moment in ancient Greek medical knowledge, striking a balance between tradition and innovation, and revealing the complexity and adaptability of Hippocratic nosology and pathogenesis. The article's main thesis is that Book I of the Hippocrat-

ic *Diseases* is a pivotal example of ancient Greek nosological and physiopathological thought. It integrates tradition, humoral theory and practical innovation to provide a systematic classification of diseases and illuminate the dynamic processes underlying illness. This marks a pivotal juncture in the evolution of medical knowledge in classical Greece.

The Greeks attributed to music a profound educational and therapeutic function, and it is within this context that Antonietta Provenza's essay is situated, illustrating how the entire body of the *polis* was called upon to dance to the rhythm of harmony. This essay explores the philosophical basis of musical *ethos* as presented in key Platonic dialogues, particularly the *Republic*, *Laws* and *Timaeus*. It links the structural elements of music, such as scales, rhythms and harmonies, to the development of ethical character and emotional regulation. It highlights music's therapeutic function as a means of achieving catharsis, as well as its formative influence on individuals and societies, reinforcing civic harmony and personal virtue. Drawing on evidence from ritual practices, philosophical texts and later musical theory, the essay demonstrates how, when combined with gymnastics, music can harmonise the body and soul, thereby promoting physical health and moral well-being. It also discusses Plato's conservative stance on musical innovation, emphasising that suitable musical education is essential for fostering dispositions that align with law and social order. The investigation concludes by situating Plato's musical *paideia* within a broader tradition of ancient music therapy and presenting it as a foundational model for ethical education through the arts. The analysis shows that Plato's therapeutic musical *paideia* is a central component of his educational and ethical philosophy. In this context, music is not just an art form, but a powerful medium that shapes character, promotes emotional and moral balance, and contributes to the health of individuals and the political community. This *paideia* integrates music with physical discipline and legal frameworks to produce harmonious citizens, thereby ensuring the stability and virtue of the state.

At the opposite end of the spectrum lies the strong social and ethical-political critique advanced by the thought of the so-called Cynics. Bartosz Pokorski's essay delves into some of the fundamental issues concerning the antisocial dimension of the so-called Cynic diatribe. This study examines the Cynic attitude as a critical philosophical stance rooted in distrust of the conventional idea of the good life. Drawing on ancient sources and contemporary interpretations, including Michel Foucault's concept of *alethurgy* (truth-telling) and Peter Sloterdijk's critique of cynical reason, the text traces Cynicism from its early origins to its use of the diatribe as a dialogical form through which to convey social critique. The text argues that Cynicism functioned as both an ethical practice, emphasising self-sufficiency and courage in truth-telling, and a social critique, revealing the artificiality and exclusion embedded in dominant conceptions of the good life – particularly those upheld by ruling elites. The Cynics addressed marginalised groups excluded from political life – the *idiotai* – and challenged hierarchical social orders by exposing the illusion of universal ideals such as virtue and happiness.

Through philological and philosophical analyses of key figures such as Antisthenes, Diogenes, Teles and Bion, and discussions of the socio-political contexts of classical Greece, the text elucidates how Cynic discourse sought to emancipate ordinary people from oppressive conventions. Three key questions are addressed: 1. Who were the Cynics? The essay explores various classifications of the Cynics to distil the essence of the Cynic 'school' through their distinctive discourse, particularly the diatribe. 2. How did the Cynics express their distrust? The essay analyses the evolution of the diatribe to highlight its role in re-evaluating traditional values. 3. Who was their message directed at? The text demonstrates how this redefines the concept of the good life, challenging socio-political norms and class structures in the process.

In the context of defining what constitutes the *good life* for the Greeks, not only reasoning but also feelings and emotions evidently play a significant role. In her essay, Joanna Sowa addresses this theme from the perspective of Plutarch's ethical thought and argues that Plutarch, drawing from Platonic and Aristotelian traditions yet offering original insights, views feelings not as mere disturbances or diseases of the soul but as essential elements intimately connected with reason. The work emphasizes the dualistic yet harmonious nature of the soul, where passions and reason must interact productively. Properly cultivated and guided by reason, emotions become vital aids in ethical development, decision-making, virtuous action, and social bonds. The text highlights feelings' motivational power and their role in education and self-improvement, particularly through the process of ethical habituation and the shaping of character. In Plutarch's view, the good life is richly emotional, with intense pleasures derived from intellectual pursuits, virtuous deeds, and genuine relationships. The work concludes that emotions, when rightly directed, are the 'glue' of the soul, foundation of community, and a driving force toward the true good, thus constituting an indispensable and positive foundation for personal and social flourishing.

In his essay, Matteo Di Franco examines how two great intellectuals and writers of the 2nd century CE, Aelius Aristides and Lucian, described and assessed the devastating Antonine Plague (also known as the Galen Plague), which struck the Roman Empire in the 2nd century AD, from a historical comparative perspective. Di Franco contextualises this ancient epidemic in light of recent experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting enduring questions about social and medical responses to widespread disease outbreaks. It focuses particularly on the testimonies of the contemporary sophists Lucian and Aelius Aristides, who provide valuable, albeit fragmented, eyewitness accounts of the plague's impact in various regions of the Empire. It discusses Galen's medical observations, noting his detailed yet scattered descriptions of symptoms such as high fever, ulcers, hemorrhages and mental disturbances. It also highlights the current scholarly consensus that the disease was most likely a virulent form of smallpox, possibly hemorrhagic smallpox. Aristides' account is unique in attributing healing to divine intervention rather than medical treatment, illustrating the intersection of religion and medicine during the epidemic. Lucian's writings offer a

critical and ironic perspective, notably through his satirical depiction of false prophets exploiting the crisis. The article situates the plague within the broader geopolitical and cultural context of the Roman Empire, emphasising how epidemic narratives are shaped by their literary and rhetorical contexts and often only become clear in retrospect. The article also highlights the importance of trade routes and military movements in spreading the disease, emphasising the need for a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the Antonine Plague as a medical and historical phenomenon. The Antonine Plague was a complex epidemic that had a profound medical, cultural and political impact on Roman society. By combining medical evidence from Galen with literary accounts from Lucian and Aelius Aristides, the text argues that a comprehensive understanding of the plague necessitates the integration of medical, historical, and rhetorical analyses. These sources reveal the multifaceted nature of the pandemic, where medical knowledge was incomplete, religion was intertwined with healing and social responses varied, while emphasising the epidemic's long-term consequences for the Roman Empire and its global connections in the ancient world.

Vincenzo Damiani's essay focuses on the complex and delicate interconnection between ethics and medicine in the work of Galen, the great physician of Pergamon, here portrayed as a proponent of the fundamentally medical nature of moral virtue. The paper argues that Galen shifts responsibility for regulating an individual's way of life from philosophy to medicine, emphasising the physiological interdependence of body and soul. Drawing on Platonic and Aristotelian theories, Galen defines health as a function-based, individual and normative state encompassing physical and mental well-being, not merely as a balance of bodily elements. In Galen's view, health aligns closely with moral virtue; both are conceived as the highest aims, which are not perfectly attainable, but which exist as ideal norms that guide progressive improvement. The study highlights Galen's use of medical and behavioural prescriptions, such as dietetics and lifestyle management, to influence character formation. This extends the role of the physician into moral supervision. This blurring of the boundaries between medicine and philosophy implies that achieving health also means advancing towards virtue, and that external mentoring is essential for moral progress. Ultimately, Damiani demonstrates how Galen redefines the good life as health – a holistic integration of physical and moral well-being – which is grounded in teleological, physiological and ethical perspectives. Galen's central argument is that health not only constitutes the optimal functioning of the body and soul, but also equates with moral virtue. This represents the ultimate goal in life. By making medical practice responsible for guiding the physiological and ethical aspects of individuals, Galen effectively medicalises virtue, transforming traditional philosophical concerns about the good life into medical objectives. This medicalisation is based on a materialistic view of soul-body unity and establishes a continuum between physical health and moral excellence; both require supervision and gradual progress under the guidance of a physician.

Aneta Tylak's essay offers an introduction to Gnostic thought and its aspiration to happiness through an exegesis of the wording of some of the most representative texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. In her analysis of *gnosis* as a spiritual path to happiness within the Hermetic tradition, Aneta Tylak focuses on two seminal texts: the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the Latin *Asclepius*. She outlines Hermetism as a religio-philosophical system that emerged in Hellenistic Alexandria and was characterised by the syncretism of Greek philosophy – notably Platonic, Presocratic, Aristotelian and Stoic thought – with Egyptian and Judeo-Christian religious elements. Central to this worldview is the triadic relationship between God, the world and humanity, in which human beings seek to realise their true divine nature through self-knowledge (*gnosis*) and knowledge of God. The texts emphasise the concept of the mind (*nous*) as a divine gift that enables humans to transcend corporeal limitations and achieve spiritual enlightenment. The Hermetic writings depict the body as a mortal and restrictive element, frequently regarded as an impediment to the soul's immortality and divine origin, yet essential for fulfilling humanity's role in the cosmos. The path to happiness requires rejecting bodily desires and ignorance, cultivating reverence (piety) and philosophy (the love of knowledge), and ultimately attaining *gnosis* – knowledge of God and the true self – that leads to divine likeness and eternal happiness. The article presents *gnosis* as an existential transformation and spiritual awakening that realigns humans with universal order and divinity, not only as intellectual knowledge. The main thesis is that, in the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the Latin *Asclepius*, *gnosis* constitutes the essential spiritual pathway to true happiness. This enables humans to recognise their immortal, divine nature and to participate in the unity of God, the world and themselves. True happiness is thus achieved through self-knowledge, the rejection of material ignorance, and the pursuit of piety and philosophical wisdom. This culminates in transformative *gnosis* – an experiential knowledge of God that transcends mortal existence and leads to eternal bliss.

Elisa Groff's essay aims to dispel one of the myths of modern medicine: the idea that hysteria could be explained by sexual abstinence, in which is supposedly supported by ancient medical texts. This article examines the diagnosis and treatment of 'uterine suffocation' (*hysterike pnix*) in Byzantine medicine. It focuses on Aëtius of Amida's sixth-century account, comparing it with earlier ancient medical theories. Contrary to popular modern narratives, the study shows that ancient medicine did not view hysteria as a psychological disorder caused by sexual abstinence. Furthermore, there was no single diagnostic category of hysteria in antiquity. Rather, uterine suffocation was considered a physical condition caused by bodily humours and the retention of semen, with no psychological cause. Notably, Aëtius advocated therapeutic masturbation administered by a midwife as a treatment for uterine spasms, offering a perspective that differed from that of earlier authorities such as Galen. Furthermore, the article argues that the modern notion of hysteria as a female psychological ailment rooted in sexual repression is a misinterpretation constructed by nineteenth-century neurology and popularised by the media. This is not an accurate reflection of ancient medical

understanding. It calls for a reassessment of women's sexual and reproductive health in historical contexts, emphasising the need for nuanced readings of ancient sources to avoid perpetuating gender bias and medical misconceptions in historical scholarship and contemporary practice.

In the transition from Late Antiquity to the study of the modern period, the essay by Berenice Cavarra and Marco Cilione offers a model of inquiry into the innovative methods and translational practices from Greek into Latin employed by the humanist from Piacenza, Giorgio Valla. The analysis presented in the text takes place on two levels. Firstly, it analyses the content of notes on diet in the medical works of Theophanes Chrysobalantes, as well as how some readers interpreted them. Secondly, it analyses the interplay between continuity and transformation in theoretical models of dietetics from antiquity to the Byzantine era. The study positions dietetics as a pivotal theme in ancient medical philosophy, with its roots in the Hippocratic and Galenic traditions that emphasise achieving balance in bodily humours through dietary practices and preparation methods. The study also sheds light on Theophanes' encyclopaedic project under Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, which synthesises therapeutic, dietetic and pharmaceutical knowledge, drawing on classical sources such as Oribasius and Aëtius. The article also explores the Latin translations by Giorgio Valla, emphasising the cultural and linguistic challenges involved in translating Greek medical terminology and concepts into the Renaissance humanist framework. Through philological and historical-medical analysis, the paper demonstrates how Theophanes and his readers adapted medical content for practical use while preserving its theoretical roots, thereby contributing to the legacy and evolution of dietary medicine.

Irene Calà's essay presents the work of a prominent Byzantine physician, Symeon Seth, tracing the reception of his editions and translations during the Renaissance and focusing on the state of the text attributed to him in a sixteenth-century manuscript from Salamanca. The article examines how the revival of Greco-Roman medical texts was facilitated by printing innovations and scholarly efforts to recover and translate authoritative manuscripts into Latin and vernacular languages. It emphasises the importance of Hippocrates and Galen, as well as lesser-known Byzantine authors such as Symeon Seth. Their works circulated in manuscript form and influenced early modern medical knowledge. The study provides a detailed analysis of the sixteenth-century manuscript Salamanca 2713, which contains medical texts attributed to Symeon Seth, although some attributions remain uncertain. The relationship between Symeon Seth's treatises and earlier sources is explored, with a focus on the predominance of late antique and Byzantine material rather than strictly Galenic texts. It details the role of prominent figures such as Giorgio Valla and Giglio Gregorio Giraldi in translating and disseminating these medical texts, illustrating the humanist and scholarly networks involved in spreading Byzantine medical knowledge during the Renaissance. Ultimately, the article concludes that, although Symeon Seth was not among the most widely

recognised authors, his work played a significant part in transmitting and receiving classical medical knowledge in early modern Europe.

Focusing again on the modern era, the volume concludes with the essay by Marek Gensler, which investigates the dietary interpretation of Aristotelian thought by the English philosopher Walter Burley (14th century). Challenging the common medieval stereotype of bodily mortification, it demonstrates how Burley combines Aristotelian principles with psychosomatic anthropology to envisage well-being as encompassing physical health and moral virtue. Burley's hygienic advice is based on the principle of the golden mean and covers diet, exercise and sleep as important factors in maintaining the balance of bodily humours, natural heat and radical moisture, which are essential for life. He emphasises moderation tailored to individual constitution, age, and activity, highlighting the physiological and psychological interdependence in health preservation. The study also examines Burley's detailed analyses of nutrition, sleep mechanisms and the effects of physical exertion, shedding light on his normative framework for achieving balance in life. While Burley did not explicitly formulate a systematic hygiene theory, the paper concludes that his practical and ethical reflections reveal a sophisticated medieval understanding of health as a harmonious state of body and soul.

The proceedings collected in this volume offer insights into various aspects of ancient and medieval medicine. They also shed light on how people used to think about health and the conditions necessary for a good life. The results of the research presented here, and the organisation of the conferences in Łódź and Palermo – with the Ulm centre playing a leading role – would not have been possible without the support and dedication of many individuals. We are especially grateful to Vincenzo Damiani, Elisa Groff, and Fiona Schmitt for their invaluable assistance. We also wish to acknowledge the generous support of the institutions that co-financed both the publication of this volume and the organization of the two conferences.

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