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# THE COMMON HEALTHCARE APPROACHES IN THE ERA OF GRECO-ROMAN ANTIQUITY

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**Abstract:** This study explores the practices and training of medical practitioners during Greco-Roman times. Medical education primarily occurred through apprenticeships with established physicians, yet there were no formal qualifying medical examinations, resulting in significant variability in the standards of practice.
**Key words:** military hospitals, Greek medicine, advancements in public health, professional organization, contemporary medicine.

In Rome, the traditional practices of magic-religious healing were gradually replaced by the introduction of Greek physicians and their medical knowledge. Concurrently, Roman administrative reforms led to enhancements in water and food supply systems, the establishment of a comprehensive sewage disposal network, and the creation of military hospitals during the Roman Period. As Rome emerged as the preeminent urban center in the Mediterranean, it drew prominent Greek physicians, including Galen of Pergamon. His extensive writings, grounded in original experimentation and comprehensive scholarship, epitomize the zenith of Greek medicine. Galen's synthesis ultimately became the prevailing medical doctrine among the scholars of the Byzantine Empire, who focused on clarifying, systematizing, and adapting the vast array of ancient medical texts they inherited.

This study explores the practices and training of medical practitioners during Greco-Roman times. Medical education primarily occurred through apprenticeships with established physicians, yet there were no formal qualifying examinations, resulting in significant variability in the standards of practice. During the Roman period, the majority of medical practitioners were Greek and operated as itinerant physicians. Civic physicians, who were employed by local communities, began to appear in Greek society from the 5th century BC, but this development occurred much later in Rome, likely not until the 4th century AD. Rome's notable contributions to medicine included advancements in public health, exemplified by their aqueducts, public baths, and sewage systems, as well as a highly effective medical service for their military forces. Hospitals, known as valetudinarian, were established for military personnel and slaves on large estates from the 1st century BC, while civic hospitals for the general populace did not emerge until the 4th century AD. The Greek medical schools of Cos and Cnidos eventually overshadowed by the school of Alexandria in Egypt, and later by the school of Carthage in northern Africa towards the end of the Roman Empire. The decline of these institutions during the Christian era marked the end of significant medical advancements from antiquity.

The origins of contemporary medicine traced to the 5th century BC, coinciding with the flourishing of literature, philosophy, arts, and sciences during the Golden Age of Athens. It was

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during this period that the Greek communities of Cos and Cnidos established the principles of rational medicine. While the Hippocratic corpus provides significant insights into the logic and ethics of this emerging medical practice, it offers limited information regarding the actual conduct of practitioners. This article explores the fundamental aspects of medical practice in ancient times, as well as the teachings of prominent physicians who shaped the field during the Greek and Hellenistic periods, extending into the Roman era.

The origins of Greek medical history can be traced back to the era of Homer. In the Iliad (1.1 -43ff; 450- 480; XI.518 and 833), the god of healing, Apollo, along with his son Asclepius, a physician, play significant roles during the Trojan War. Celsius (Proem, c.3) later noted that their contributions were primarily in the treatment of battle injuries rather than in the management of epidemic diseases. The Iliad itself records 147 injuries sustained in battle, comprising 106 spear wounds, 17 sword cuts, 12 arrow injuries, and 12 wounds from slingshots (Porter 1997:51).

The prevailing belief during this period was that diseases were attributed to the will of the gods, leading to a significant influence of religious and prophetic practices on health matters. Consequently, priests, magical healers, herbalists, and those skilled in root cutting (rhizotomoi) (Godderis 1997:235-237) predominantly managed the practice of medicine. However, by the 6th century BC, a notable group of philosopher-physicians emerged, profoundly influencing the evolution of healthcare. This group included Thales of Miletus and his disciple Anaximander, as well as the distinguished Pythagoras (570-489 BC) from Croton in Southern Italy. In addition to his substantial contributions to mathematics and physics, Pythagoras, possibly in collaboration with his student Alcmaeon, proposed the theory of the four bodily humours, which, despite its inaccuracies, remained a foundational concept in human physiology for over two thousand years (Major 1954:110-116). It is clear that by the 6th century BC, there were established centers of medical education in locations such as Croton, Cyrene (Northern Africa), and Cnidos (Nunn 19%: 12).

In the 5th century BC, coinciding with the Golden Age of Athens, a rational approach to medicine, known as technê iatrikê, emerged. The Greek medical community on the island of Cos, inspired by Hippocrates, primarily developed this system, which minimized the influence of religion and supernatural elements. Notable earlier figures such as Anaxagoras and Empedocles also played crucial roles in this evolutionary advancement (Major 1954:113-138).

Hippocratic doctors offered their services to patients across all segments of society, though Godderis (1997:252-3) indicates that wealthier individuals likely received more focused care than poorer ones. Physicians typically gained their training through apprenticeships, with the fortunate few attending the renowned schools of Cos and Cnidos. The absence of a formal professional registration system resulted in a wide range of training quality and standards. While most physicians were male (iatroi), there were also female practitioners (iatrinai), midwives (maiai), and those who practiced both professions (iatro-maiai). The role of modern nurses was not recognized, but there are accounts of assistants (huperetoi ton iatrón), who were generally slaves in the process of training.

The writings attributed to Hippocrates provide minimal insight into the professional organization or the social dynamics of doctor-patient interactions. Given the diverse nature of Greek physicians during this period, it is challenging to make broad generalizations regarding their status, societal acceptance, or methods of practice. Nevertheless, Edelstein (1987:87-90) posits that the typical Hippocratic physician likely engaged in an itinerant practice, seeking to

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establish a professional presence within the community. This individual would have functioned more as an artisan than as a modern professional, possessing a limited social standing. His reputation would have been contingent upon his clinical achievements, necessitating that he promote himself in competition with other medical practitioners or healers.

Greek medicine began to permeate Roman society as early as the 4th century BC. Prior to this, traditional Roman medical practices, akin to those of the Greeks four to five centuries earlier, relied heavily on folk remedies, herbal treatments, religious beliefs, and superstitions (Nutton 1988c:31-40). While many Romans welcomed Greek physicians, there was notable opposition from prominent individuals. Cato the Elder (234-149 BC), who treated his family, dependents, and slaves with conventional remedies such as cabbage and wine, vehemently opposed the Greeks and even barred them from his residence (Nutton 1988b:42). Cicero (106-43 BC) regarded physicians as individuals of low status mere tradesmen rather than men. Ironically, he held his own Greek doctor in high esteem (Nutton 1988a:28). Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79) launched a comprehensive and influential critique of all things Greek, particularly targeting Greek medicine, which he believed contributed to the gradual decline of Roman culture (Nutton 1988a:43). Despite this resistance, Greek physicians came to dominate the medical landscape, with Nutton (1988b:37) estimating that over 90% of Rome's doctors in the 1st century AD were Greek, 75% in the 2nd century, and around 65% in the 3rd century.

Several medical sects or schools emerged during the Roman era, but their practical contributions to the evolution of medicine were likely restricted. The Methodist school, which dates back to the 1st century BC, maintained that all ailments arose from the abnormal operation of minute body pores. This perspective led to the belief that treatments were relatively simple, thus negating the necessity for physicians to have a profound understanding of anatomy or physiology.

This study encompasses a thousand-year period characterized by the evolution and solidification of medical science and practice. It recounts a narrative of significant Greek ingenuity and original thought, bolstered by meaningful practical input from the Romans, culminating in a medical framework that managed to survive a millennium of scientific inertia. Although Galen's scholarship, dogma, and authority prevailed during the medieval period, much of his theoretical framework was invalidated by the new insights that emerged during the Renaissance. The fundamental clinical guidelines and ethical principles established by Hippocrates have demonstrated remarkable durability and are still revered in contemporary discourse.

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