

The Social Status of Physicians in Greece and Rome

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Physicians in today's society are afforded a great deal of respect as learned professionals. Today when someone goes to a doctor he knows that the physician has been to medical school and passed the board exams. In other words, that person knows that the doctor is fully qualified to treat him. In the earliest days of Western Medicine this was not the case. There was no regulation as to who could practice medicine.

The lack of regulation of doctors was one of many factors that affected the social status of physicians in the ancient world. Other factors that affected the status of the medical profession and its practitioners were: the social class from which the practitioners of medicine were drawn, whether the physician was a citizen or not, the presence of various quacks and charlatans claiming to be healers and the physician's status as compatriot or foreigner. All these factors contribute to how physicians were viewed in the ancient world as well as how those views of doctors were different in Greece and Rome.

In Greece around the 5th century B.C. there was a rise in a new class of healer. These physicians were not priests with divine gifts, but simply craftsmen practicing an art. They were often approached with mistrust and caution because there were no regulations on who could practice medicine, and the only way to know if a doctor was

competent was from his results. These physicians in Greece were of two types: The educated Hippocratic physicians who studied medical theory at a medical school such as those at Cos or Cnidus, and the slave-doctor who learned his craft through apprenticeship and observation. The Hippocratic physicians came from the upper echelon of Greek society, as is seen in the example of Eryximachus in Plato's *Symposium*, while the slave-doctor or doctor's assistant would often be a slave or freedman.

The Romans did not really develop medicine on their own. They simply imported the profession and its practitioners from Greece. There was still no regulation of the profession, so all the problems of quackery and incompetence that existed in Greece traveled to Rome with the doctors. However, the Greek physicians in Rome were all foreigners and many of them were slaves. There also existed in Rome some feeling of anti-Hellenism, which also affected the amount of respect afforded to the medical art and its practitioners in Rome. The fact that physicians came from a higher social class in Greece and were often citizens, whereas in Rome physicians were at best foreign freedmen meant that those who practiced medicine were looked upon very differently in Greece than they were in Rome. In Greece the medical profession and its practitioners was viewed as a respectable profession that was practiced by some of the Greek nobility. In Rome this profession was viewed as necessary, but it was not terribly respectable as it was practiced mostly by foreign slaves and freedmen.

Medicine in Greece: Homer

The earliest evidence we have of medicine in the ancient Greece comes from the earliest writings of that world, the Homeric epics. Homer portrays medicine as a noble art. The heroes of war were often also experts in medicine. The physician in Homer was

held in great esteem, as Homer says, because he was “a man who was worth more than many other men put together for he can cut out arrows and spread healing herbs.”¹ In fact, in the Homeric epics there are described one hundred and forty seven different wounds as well as various potions, and other remedies that are administered to the wounded.²

In book 11 of the *Iliad* Nestor takes the wounded physician and son of the Greek God of healing, Asclepius, Machaon into his tent to treat himself and some other wounded men. Machaon, who aside from being a physician was also a warrior-chieftan,³ was particularly valued. Homer made specific mention of how Machaon was rushed back to safety once he was wounded because, just as the previous quote says, a physician was held in higher esteem than a regular fighter.⁴ We see this same physician, Machaon, is brought in to treat Menelaus in an earlier episode in book 4 of the *Iliad*.⁵ Menelaus, when calling for Machaon, refers to him as *amumôn* (blameless).⁶

In another episode in book 11, Patroklos gives medical attention to Eurypylos.⁷ Patroklos had learned the art of healing from Achilles, who Homer tells us had learned the skill from Chiron, the same Centaur that taught Asclepius.⁸ The job of tending to Eurypylos falls to Patroklos because the two medics the Greeks had with them, Machaon

¹ *Iliad* 11.515-516.

² Grube 123.

³ Noonan 374.

⁴ *Iliad* 11.511-516.

⁵ *Iliad* 4.189-219.

⁶ *Iliad* 4.194.

⁷ *Iliad* 11.828-848.

⁸ *Iliad* 11.831-832.

and Podalirius, were indisposed. Podalirius was himself injured and Machaon was out fighting the Trojans.⁹

In the *Iliad* there is nobody who is exclusively a physician. There are, however, among the Greek heroes, men who have learned the medical arts and are praised and valued for their knowledge and skill. Aside from treating wounds, these particular heroes also led men into battle. They fought as any other epic hero. Their knowledge of medicine, though it made them uniquely praiseworthy and valued, was secondary to their duty as soldiers.

In the *Odyssey*, there is a mentioning of men who are solely physicians. Homer writes “Who pray, of himself ever seeks out and bids a stranger from abroad, unless it be one of those that are masters of some public craft, a prophet, or a healer of ills, or a builder, or a divine minstrel, who gives delight with his song? For these men are bidden all over the boundless earth.”¹⁰ By placing a healer in such company one can see that physicians and their skills received a good deal of respect in the Homeric world.

Asclepius

Religious medicine existed in the ancient world before any practical medicine. As Sigerist writes, “Religious medicine is timeless; we come upon it in the initial stages and throughout the course of every civilization, no matter what other forms of medicine may have developed.”¹¹ The religious medicine of the ancient Greece co-existed with more scientific and practical medicine. There were many healing cults in the ancient world but one assumed a dominant position, the cult of Asclepius.¹²

⁹ *Iliad* 11.832-835.

¹⁰ *Odyssey* 17.382-385.

¹¹ Sigerist 44.

¹² Sigerist 44.

The focus of this cult was the god Asclepius, son of Apollo and Coronis. Coronis was killed by Artemis and Asclepius was raised by the centaur, Chiron.¹³ According to Pindar, Chiron taught Asclepius the art of healing.¹⁴ The main healing activity of the cult was a type of sleep or dream healing. Apollodorus also claims that Athena gave Asclepius a magic potion made from the blood of a gorgon. According to the myth if the potion was made from the blood on the right side of the gorgon, it had the ability to heal and even bring back the dead, but if it came from the left side of the gorgon, it was the most deadly of poisons.¹⁵ This cult has not only religious, but also magical aspects to it, including the use of potions and incantations. The priests of Asclepius, the Asclepiads, practiced medicine and the temples of Asclepius were medical centers and schools. Aside from “practical medicine” and magic, the Asclepiads focused on a type of sleep or dream healing.¹⁶ This worked fairly simply. The afflicted individual would come to a temple of Asclepius (an Asclepion) and would make a sacrifice to the god. This person would then go to sleep inside the temple and supposedly would either be cured as he slept or would have the method of how to cure himself revealed to him in a dream.¹⁷

The temples of Asclepius developed into healing centers as well as places of medical learning.¹⁸ The cult of Asclepius thrived throughout Greece and was imported to Rome.¹⁹ It was at one of these temples, the Asclepion at Cos that Hippocrates received

¹³ Kerenyi 23.

¹⁴ *Pythian* 3.1-7.

¹⁵ Edelstein (1967) 9.

¹⁶ Cf. *IG* 4.2.1 (cited in Edelstein and Edelstein) “As he was sleeping in the temple the god extracted the spearhead and gave it to him into his hands. When day came Euhippus departed cured, and he held the spearhead in his hands.”

¹⁷ Singer and Underwood 25.

¹⁸ Sigerist 46.

¹⁹ Sigerist 45.

his medical training.²⁰ It was the environment in which Hippocrates was trained and its popularity and the general esteem this cult received is reflected in the status of early Greek, Hippocratic physicians.

Hippocrates and Hippocratic Physicians

At the same time that Greece saw such men as Pericles, Herodotus, Thucydides, Sophocles and Euripides, Hippocrates, the man later to be known as the “Father of Medicine” came to prominence.²¹ Most of the accepted biographical information about Hippocrates comes to us through a biography written by Soranus in the second century A.D.²² It is thought that Soranus gathered most of his information on Hippocrates from evidence contained in other Greek writers, particularly from the *Protagoras* and the *Phaedrus* of Plato.²³ Hippocrates was reported to have been born on the island of Cos in 460 or 459 B.C. and to have died in 355 B.C. at the age of one hundred and four.²⁴

Fairly soon after his death his legacy became something of a legend. It was a common story among the ancients that bees made a hive upon his tomb, that he was an initiate into the Athenian mysteries and was admitted into the Pyrtaneum.²⁵ Finally, it was said that he treated the madness of Democritus and fought of the plagues at Abdera.²⁶ Five hundred years later authors such as Varro and Pliny claimed that he destroyed the temple and the archives of the Asclepion at Cos in order to assure for

²⁰ Castiglioni 149.

²¹ Castiglioni 148.

²² Sigerist 268.

²³ Castiglioni 149.

²⁴ Castiglioni 149.

²⁵ See Castiglioni 149 for the citations.

²⁶ Castiglioni 150.

himself the glory of the discovery of medicine.²⁷ All of these claims are wholly unsubstantiated and add to the reputation of “the father of medicine.” As Castiglioni writes, “He appeared to his contemporaries and to posterity surrounded by an aureole of glory.” In fact, Aristotle calls him “great” because he is a physician (*Politics* 7.2) and Erotian considered him as equal in importance to Homer.²⁸ Hippocrates is also given credit for the corpus of medical text which bears his name.

While modern scholarship ponders over questions of exactly how much of the *Hippocratic Corpus* should be attributed to Hippocrates (if any at all), the fact that later physician authors preserve his teachings and that legend grew up around his name proves that he and his followers were afforded a great deal of respect and honor in ancient times.

The *Hippocratic Corpus* is an immense collection of works allegedly from the medical school at Cos and they cover a wide range of subjects. For the purposes of this paper the technical medical papers, such as *On Anatomy*, *On the Nature of Bones*, and *On Fractures*, shall not be discussed. Instead, the focus shall be on the essays that deal with proper deportment and ethics of the Hippocratic doctor. These writings include *Precepts*, *Oath*, *Laws*, and *Decorum*. These writings are important to the reputation of physicians in the ancient world as they outline a code of proper behavior, which, if followed, would make the practice of medicine a respectable craft in the ancient world. The first and most important of these ethical documents in the Hippocratic oath:

I swear by Apollo Physician and Asclepius and Hygieia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will fulfill according to my ability and judgment this oath and this covenant:

²⁷ Castiglioni 150.

²⁸ Castiglioni 150 Erotian was a Roman physician to who wrote a “Glossary to Hippocrates.”

To hold him who has taught me this art as equal to my parents and to live my life in partnership with him, and if he is in need of money to give him a share of mine, and to regard his offspring as equal to my brothers in male lineage and to teach them this art - if they desire to learn it - without fee and covenant; to give a share of precepts and oral instruction and all the other learning to my sons and to the sons of him who has instructed me and to pupils who have signed the covenant and have taken an oath according to the medical law, but no one else.

I will apply dietetic measures for the benefit of the sick according to my ability and judgment; I will keep them from harm and injustice.

I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody who asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect. Similarly I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy. In purity and holiness I will guard my life and my art.²⁹

I will not use the knife, not even on sufferers from stone, but will withdraw in favor of such men as are engaged in this work.

Whatever houses I may visit, I will come for the benefit of the sick, remaining free of all intentional injustice, of all mischief and in particular of sexual relations with both female and male persons, be they free or slaves.

What I may see or hear in the course of the treatment or even outside of the treatment in regard to the life of men, which on no account one must spread abroad, I will keep to myself, holding such things shameful to be spoken about.

If I fulfill this oath and do not violate it, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and art, being honored with fame among all men for all time to come; if I transgress it and swear falsely, may the opposite of all this be my lot.³⁰

The presence of such an oath among physicians in Ancient Greece shows that they were aware how important it was that they be trusted and have good standing in their

²⁹ An interesting side concerning these prohibitions on abortion, assisted suicide and surgery should be mentioned. As abortion and suicide were widely accepted practices in ancient Greece, Sigerist argues that these prohibitions are either not part of the original oath or an indication that the oath was written later than many of the works in the *Hippocratic Corpus* and that the oath was either composed or edited under the influence of the Pythagoreans after the time of Hippocrates. This is attested to by the fact that methods of abortion are actually mentioned in *On Laws* (books 7 and 8), an important book of the *Hippocratic Corpus*, as well as the fact that there is in fact a Hippocratic work entitled *In the Surgery*. (Sigerist 302)

³⁰ Edelstein (1943).

society. It promises fame and glory to those men who keep the oath and disgrace for those who violate it. So, even there were no laws regarding the regulation of the practice of medicine, there was at least some attempt made by some physicians to provide ethical guidelines and help bring to the practice of medicine an air of respectability. Aside from the oath, there are many more references to the proper behavior for a doctor within the works of the *Hippocratic Corpus*. For example in *On The Physician* it is required that a doctor look healthy and plump, as the common people are of the opinion that a doctor in poor health is not able to take good care of others. He must also be clean and well kempt.³¹ In *Decorum* it is written that the physician must have a certain readiness of wit, that he must not engage in any gossip and that will avoid making a fuss, but instead be reserved when treating and talking with patients.³²

What one can clearly see is that Hippocrates, or at least the school that is attributed to him, cared greatly about how he and his fellow physicians were seen by the greater society. To this end many ethical and behavioral guidelines for Hippocratic physicians were created. The presence of such guidelines and rules for behavior and the emphasis on ethics among the followers of Hippocrates would have helped the social status of these men and their craft. We can see this because the lack of any actual regulation of physicians in the ancient world hurt the reputation of the proper Hippocratic physician. The fact that anyone, whether learned and competent or not, could go around calling himself an *iatros* and practice medicine allowed for all sorts of poor medical treatment. The problem was that the common man had no initial way to tell the true physician from the quack, and this contributed to some distrust of physicians. As Phillips

³¹ Phillips 73.

³² *Decorum* 7.

writes, “The career of the doctor generally began in one of the schools, and it would be natural for him to belong to one of the guilds, but practice was equally open to others, including quacks, charlatans, drug-sellers, and even magicians. Against these the doctor had to maintain himself by personal qualities and skill in argument as well as by the mere results of medical competence.”³³

Aside from quacks, charlatans and magicians, there were two separate types of *iatroi*, one which learned medicine through logic and science and one which learned simply through observation and practice. Plato discusses the qualities of these two different types of *iatroi* in his *Laws*.

And did you ever observe that there are two classes of patients in states, slaves and freemen; and the slave doctors run about and cure the slaves, or wait for them in the dispensaries--practitioners of this sort never talk to their patients individually, or let them talk about their own individual complaints? The slave doctor prescribes what mere experience suggests, as if he had exact knowledge; and when he has given his orders, like a tyrant, he rushes off with equal assurance to some other servant who is ill; and so he relieves the master of the house of the care of his invalid slaves. But the other doctor, who is a freeman, attends and practices upon freemen; and he carries his enquiries far back, and goes into the nature of the disorder; he enters into discourse with the patient and with his friends, and is at once getting information from the sick man, and also instructing him as far as he is able, and he will not prescribe for him until he has first convinced him; at last, when he has brought the patient more and more under his persuasive influences and set him on the road to health, he attempts to effect a cure.³⁴

These two types of doctors were both commonly called *iatroi* and were not necessarily distinguished between by the common Greek.³⁵ The slave doctor would not have been a practitioner of Hippocratic medicine. This is because he would have had no theoretical training. It is not that he would not have been successful; rather he could only deal with

³³ Philips 71.

³⁴ *Laws* 4.

³⁵ Temkin (1953) 220.

afflictions he had seen before. He could make no original diagnosis or treatment, as a Hippocratic physician could. The problem that the existence with such slave doctors raises for the social status of Hippocratic physicians is that, as they are not often distinguished from the Hippocratic physicians. Any lack of ability of these slave doctors and any failures these they may have had would be associated with all doctors, both Hippocratic and not. Temkin, discussing the differences between these two types of doctors, writes about the slave doctor (whom he refers to as a leech): “The leech may know very much, but his knowledge will always consist of a certain number of skills. Beyond that number he cannot go, that is to say he cannot deal with what is unfamiliar to him and he cannot individualize his treatment.”³⁶ Here again is seen the limitations of the slave doctor.

The coming in to prominence of rational doctors such as the Hippocratic doctors (and to a lesser extent the slave doctors) did not at all mean that superstitious healing and quackery went away. In fact, the Hippocratic text *Sacred Diseases* attacks charlatans as quacks concerning their treatment of epilepsy:

In my opinion those who first attributed a sacred character to this disease were the sort of people we nowadays call witch-doctors, faith-healers, charlatans and quacks. These people also pretend to be very pious and to have superior knowledge. Shielding themselves by citing the divine as an excuse for their own perplexity in not knowing what beneficial treatment to apply, they held this condition to be sacred so that their ignorance might not be manifest. By choosing suitable terms they established a mode of treatment that safeguarded their own positions. They prescribed purifications and incantations.³⁷

³⁶ Temkin (1953) 220.

³⁷ *Sacred Disease* 4.

In this same text the author also lambastes alleged charlatans for claiming that mental disease and madness has some supernatural cause.³⁸ Clearly those physicians of the Hippocratic School felt it was necessary to defend their methods of treatment as well as to expose the methods of quacks and charlatans as frauds. The persistence of such quacks who challenge the treatments prescribed by physicians or who, worse yet, while claiming to be physicians give poor prescriptions, would negatively impact the view of physicians in ancient Greek society. Therefore the good reputation of the Hippocratic physician could easily be marred by such amateurs.

Despite the lack of any regulation of the practice of medicine and the presence of quacks and charlatans, the medical profession was afforded at least as much respect as other professions of ancient Greece. As Grube writes,

Medicine had long been recognized as a profession, though the word profession is misleading. The Greek term *dhmiourgovJjjJV* was applied equally to the doctor, the poet and the craftsman. It implies that his is an art and craft (the Greek *tevenh* means both) which requires special knowledge.³⁹

This same level of consideration for the practice of medicine is found in Plato's *Republic*. He writes, "...any of the craftsmen, whether he priest or physician or carpenter..."⁴⁰ In fact, medicine was organized and run much like any other craft in the ancient world. The basic training was often through apprenticeships⁴¹. The only major difference between medicine and some of these other crafts was that there were actual medical schools, such as the one on Cos, which taught medicine through theory and logic, not just through observation and practice. While these schools were unique to the medical profession

³⁸ *Sacred Disease* 4.

³⁹ Grube 128.

⁴⁰ *Republic* 3.

⁴¹ Temkin (1953) 215.

there was no necessity to attend them in order to practice medicine. It seems then that the very difference between the slave-doctor and the true physician as discussed by Plato in his *Laws* would have been attendance and learning at one of these schools.

The Greek physician from the time of Hippocrates onward, that is, the time when the rational (non-religious) physician came to prominence, were considered as honorable as any other craftsmen. Their reputation depended solely on their skill and renown. This reputation and the reputation of the medical craft in general was greatly aided by the fact that the Hippocratic physicians would have been from moneyed and, very likely, aristocratic families. This is most likely due to the fact that only the wealthy could afford to spend the time and money necessary to get medical schooling. Plato gives us a prime example of an aristocratic physician in his character of Eryximachus from the *Symposium*. The very fact that Eryximachus is attending a symposium marks him as a noble, for these drinking parties were exclusive to the aristocratic nobility of ancient Greece. Skinner writes, "... oligarchic families closed ranks, forming a tightly knit leisured class whose marriage and friendship affiliation crossed *polis* boundaries... The symposium became central to this lifestyle."⁴²

Eryximachus is more than a secondary character in Plato's *Symposium*. He is, as Edelstein argues, among the most important guests at the party: He writes, "Erixymachus, in addition to giving the speeches that have been considered so far (namely, his speech on the nature of *Eros*), plays an important role throughout the symposium."⁴³ Erixymachus and Phaedrus are made presidents of the banquet and, whenever any of the speeches are

⁴² Skinner 47.

⁴³ Edelstein (1945) 94.

formally introduced or concluded, one of these two men is addressed.⁴⁴ In fact, it is Eryximachus who proposes the subject of love for the night's discussions.⁴⁵

Aside from being a valued member of the symposium, Eryximachus' advice is also sought by the other guests on a number of medical issues. At the beginning of the dialogue, the guests consider how much they should drink, or rather how to curtail their drinking as a few of them had hangovers from the previous night's activities. (*Symposium* 176a) It is Eryximachus who comes up with the resolution with this problem. Sighting his medical knowledge he says that it would be unwise for those suffering hangovers to drink heavily.⁴⁶ To this suggestion Phaedrus responds, "I usually follow your advice, especially where medicine is concerned. The rest of us here will do so too, if they're sensible."⁴⁷ Eryximachus is soon asked for his medical advice again as Aristodemus requests that Eryximachus cure the hiccoughs that are affecting Aristophanes.⁴⁸ Plato's respect for Eryximachus can also be seen in the *Phaedrus* where Eryximachus is again mentioned, along with his father Acumenus as authorities.⁴⁹ These physicians are placed on the same level as the likes of Sophocles and Euripides.⁵⁰

In the *Symposium* of Plato Eryximachus is shown to be a very well respected person both in general and for his medical knowledge in particular. As Edelstein says, "In all the various acts of the symposium, then, Eryximachus appears as a person of

⁴⁴ Edelstein (1945) 95.

⁴⁵ *Symposium* 177d.

⁴⁶ *Symposium* 176d.

⁴⁷ *Symposium* 176d.

⁴⁸ *Symposium* 185 d-e.

⁴⁹ *Phaedrus* 268a.

⁵⁰ *Phaedrus* 268c.

distinction.”⁵¹ Edlestein goes even as far as to say, “This physician is not simply on sufferance in the company with which he feasts. He is their peer, nay, in some respects their superior. For he exercises a certain authority over them.”⁵²

Plato’s Eryximachus provides us with one of the clearest accounts of the social status of physicians in ancient Greece. Despite all the various factors that may have hurt the reputation of the medical profession, we see through Eryximachus that medicine is an art that is both practiced and respected by the Greek nobility provided physicians were not counted among slave doctors as mere observers of the art of healing. It is from its presence in and respect by this highest class of Greek citizens that medicine receives and maintains its reputation in Greece.

Medicine in Roman Times

Most Roman doctors were Greeks. The first Greek doctor to come to Rome was Arcagathus according to Pliny’s *Natural History*. Archagathus, who came from the Greek Peloponnese, arrived in Rome in 219 B.C., and, as the one and only person in all of Rome with a claim towards professional medical knowledge, he was initially inundated with patients. However, it soon became apparent that his treatments were overwhelmingly dependent upon the knife and the cautery; in fact, they soon led to his being nicknamed *carnifex* (the executioner) and not surprisingly the number of his patients soon petered down to a trickle. No doubt they preferred to die of their own sufferings rather than any additional ones inflicted by him. This sort of thing did not work wonders for the medical

⁵¹ Edlestein (1945) 96.

⁵² Edlestein (1945) 96.

cause and it took another 100 years before people decided to give another Greek practitioner another chance. This was Asclepiades of Bithynia, who came to Rome in 100 B.C.⁵³

Before the arrival of the Greeks, early Roman medicine was part of the prevailing religion of the countryside.⁵⁴ As there were no actual “physicians” at this time in Rome, this section of Roman Medical history shall be ignored. In fact, as the Romans almost exclusively used Greek physicians, there is little to tell about the development of Roman medicine that is separate from the history of the Greek medicine, which has already been discussed. The Romans simply imported medicine from Greece. They also imported the cult of the healing god Asclepius. So, Roman medicine is, for the most part, an extension of Greek medicine. The Greeks so controlled the practice of medicine in Rome that the only Roman authors who wrote about medicine in depth, Terentius Varro and Cornelius Celsus, were not practicing physicians but encyclopedists.⁵⁵

The major difference between physicians in Greece and those in Rome was their social class. In Greece physicians were, as has been shown with the example of Eryximachus, often from the nobility. They were not only free citizens, but they were from wealthy and influential families. In Rome most of the physicians were Greek immigrants. As Scarborough writes, “Few Romans (by birth) became doctors; and the scholarly medical profession defined in Roman law and social reality remained in the hands of the Greeks who immigrated to Rome or into the provinces.”⁵⁶ Aside from being

⁵³ The preceding is a summary of Pliny *Natural History* 29.6.

⁵⁴ Scarborough (1969) 16.

⁵⁵ Henrichs 249.

⁵⁶ Scarborough (1970) 297.

of foreign origin, physicians in Rome were most often slaves or freedmen, not citizens.⁵⁷

The affect of the change in class of the physician had a predictable affect on the status of the medical profession in Rome: “aware of its dominance by slaves and freedmen tended to snub the profession as it was practiced by the Greeks.”⁵⁸

The distrust of these Greek doctors appears through the history of Rome. Pliny, at the beginning of the account of the history of medicine in his *Natural History*, mocked and criticized Greek doctors.

From this time (The arrival of the second Greek doctor in Rome), Pliny continues, the profitability of medicine knew no bounds, and the tale of Hellenistic and Roman doctors is told in terms of their moneygrubbing, making fame as well as fortune out of fads and gimmicks and of quarrelling amongst themselves like philosophers.⁵⁹

This dislike of Greek doctors is most apparent in the writings of Cato the Elder,

I will tell you in the appropriate place, my son Marcus, what I found out about those Greeks in Athens, and that it is a good thing to have a taste of their literature but not to devour it. I will drive home the point that their race is utterly vile and indocile. And believe you me, I speak as a prophet; once that race gives us its literature it will corrupt everything, and it gets even worse if it sends us its doctors. They have taken an oath⁶⁰ amongst themselves to kill all barbarians with their medicine, but they do this only for a fee so that they may be trusted and may bring ruin (all) the more easily. They often refer to us, too, as barbarians and they defile us more foully than they do others by calling us “Opikoi.”⁶¹ I have thus forbidden you dealings with their doctors.⁶²

⁵⁷ Scarborough (1970) 298.

⁵⁸ Scarborough (1970) 300.

⁵⁹ Baldwin 15.

⁶⁰ Possibly a misinterpretation of the Hippocratic Oath.

⁶¹ Henrichs explains that “to Roman ears *Opikoiv*, the Greek term for ‘Oscans,’ was tantamount to ‘simpletons.’” (Henrichs 247 note 13).

⁶² *Natural History* 29.14 –citing Cato.

Cato so despised Greek medicine that he forbid his son to have anything to do with Greek physicians. However, even Cato, the biggest detractor of Greek physicians, when giving the recipes for these folk remedies gives both the Latin and the Greek names of ingredients.⁶³ There was also the issue of the greed of Greek physicians, as Scarborough observes: “Greed for quick wealth was all too common among Hellenistic physicians who treated Roman patients...The Romans despised being exploited by the Hellenistic physicians who took their patients to be fools.”⁶⁴ This attitude of intellectual superiority among the Greek physicians can be seen in this excerpt from Galen:

You think I ought to learn a number of languages, but I feel it is proper to learn but one, that one which is my own. All peoples can use it and it is sweet-sounding and expressive for all mankind. If, however, you wish to master a languages of the barbarians, you would be wise to understand that some of the barbarian tongues sound like noises that pigs, frogs and crows make, since they lack form and elegance. Almost always some of these peoples speak deep in their throats as if they were snorting, and they use their lips to hiss, or to make their voices squeak or to speak in a dreary tone... If you do not wish to learn Greek, then you are a barbarian.⁶⁵

Still, despite any misgivings the Romans may have had about Greek physicians, they allowed them to come to Rome and used their services. In fact Julius Caesar even gave legal incentives to get physicians to stay in Rome or to immigrate to Rome. This is evidenced in this passage from Suetonius, “He likewise made all those who practiced medicine in Rome, and all teachers of the liberal arts, free of the city, in order to fix them in it, and induce others to settle there.”⁶⁶ Augustus also made a special exception for doctors when he expelled many slaves and foreigners from the city. “On one occasion, in

⁶³ Henrichs 249.

⁶⁴ Scarborough 1970: 301.

⁶⁵ Galen 8.585-587 (Ed. Kuhn) Trans. in Scarborough (1970) 301.

⁶⁶ *Divus Iulius* 42.

a season of great scarcity, which it was difficult to remedy, he ordered out of the city the troops of slaves brought for sale, the gladiators belonging to the masters of defense, and all foreigners, excepting physicians and the teachers of the liberal sciences.”⁶⁷ Though these laws do show some appreciation for the public necessity of physicians they also show that physicians were still slaves or foreign freedmen (or their descendants). Though they are given some special exemption to the harsh measures which Augustus takes they are still placed in the same category as slaves and gladiators.

Since the Romans simply imported Greek medicine, they ended up with the exact same mixture of competent and incompetent physicians and quacks. These physicians, however, were all foreigners to the Romans, and most of them were slaves. Therefore they did not afford much respect in the eyes of the Romans. On top of that, there was some anti-Hellenism that existed in Roman culture. It is this mistrust of foreigners, particularly Greeks, the physicians status as slave (or at best as a freedman) that made the social status of physicians and the medical profession much less respected in Rome than it had been in Greece.

Physicians and Ancient Humor:

Like many other professions medicine was not so highly regarded as to escape from social satire from either the Greeks or the Romans. There are many epigrams from both Greece and Rome containing doctor jokes and doctors are also mentioned and mocked in some ancient comedies. Through these jokes one can gain some understanding about how doctors were viewed in ancient times. Aristophanes, the comic playwright,

⁶⁷ *Divus Augustus* 42.

whose occasional references to the greed of doctors set the pace for centuries to come.⁶⁸

These allusions are exemplified in this line from his *Plutus*, “Seek physicians at Athens?

Nay! there's no art where there's no fee.”⁶⁹

Nicarchus, a Greek author from the first century A.D. wrote many epigrams satirizing doctors.⁷⁰ Some of which have been included in the *Greek Anthology*.

Lord Caesar, as they tell, Eurystheus once sent down great Heracles to the house of Hades; but now Menophanes the physician has sent me. So let him be called Doctor Eurystheus and no longer Doctor Menophanes.⁷¹

Lucilius, a contemporary of Nicharchus also wrote some epigrams about doctors. In one such epigram he writes, “Diophantus saw Hermogenes the doctor in his sleep and never woke up again, although he wore an amulet.”⁷²

The Roman world also provides us with many humorous accounts of bad physicians. The best examples of these humorous pokes at the medical profession come from Martial. He wrote epigrams such as these:

Until recently, Diaulus was a doctor; now he is an undertaker. He is still doing as an undertaker, what he used to do as a doctor.⁷³

You are now a gladiator, although until recently you were an ophthalmologist. You did the same thing as a doctor that you do now as a gladiator.⁷⁴

I felt a little ill and called Dr. Symmachus. Well, you came, Symmachus, but you brought 100 medical students with you. One hundred ice cold hands poked and jabbed me. I didn't have a fever, Symmachus, when I called you, but now I do⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Baldwin 15.

⁶⁹ *Plutus* 407.

⁷⁰ *Greek Anthology* (Loeb Classical Library) 67.

⁷¹ *Greek Anthology* 11.116.

⁷² *Greek Anthology* 11.257.

⁷³ Martial, *Epigrams* 1.47.

⁷⁴ Martial, *Epigrams* 8.74.

These epigrams parallel the epigrams of the *Greek Anthology*, in fact W.R. Paton writes that Martial is thought to have read both Nicarchus and Lucilius and to have been greatly influenced by both of these earlier authors.⁷⁶ We see more humor at the expense of doctors from Athenaeus, a Greek author from around A.D. 200. In his *magnum opus*, *Deipnosophistae*, he writes this: “Were it not for the doctors there wouldn’t be anything stupider than professors.”⁷⁷ Aside from simply providing amusement, these jokes can show the culture and climate from which serious criticisms of physicians, such as those of Pliny or Cato the Elder arose. The criticisms of doctors as greedy and incompetent that we see in these humorous passages are the same criticisms that are leveled at doctors in the polemic writings of Cato and others like him.

Conclusion:

The social status of physicians and their profession was very different in Greece than it was in Rome. Since many of the factors that hurt the status of physicians in Greece such as the presence of quacks and the lack of any regulation of the medical profession did not change through Roman times, the main cause of this difference was the fact that the Hippocratic physicians in Greece came from and were respected by the nobility. In Rome physicians were nearly all foreigners and were either slaves or freedmen, not citizens. Also there was some anti-Hellenistic sentiment in Rome that hurt the reputation of doctors, who were mostly Greek. Therefore the practice of medicine was held in much higher esteem in Greece than it was in Rome.

⁷⁵ Martial, *Epigrams* 5.9.

⁷⁶ *Greek Anthology* (Loeb Classical Library) 67.

⁷⁷ *Deipnosophistae* 666a.

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