

Recensioni/*Essay Reviews*

WALLANCE J.T. - The lost Theory of Asclepiades of Bithynia.
Clarendon Press-Oxford - University Press - Oxford, 1990, 162 pp.

Classical medicine of the 1st-2nd century A.D. was characterized by a debate between physicians coming from Asia Minor to Rome. Theories more than practice were the object of their disputes. Thessalus of Tralles, Rufus of Ephesus, Aretaeus of Cappadocia, Soranus of Ephesus, Caelius Aurelianus discussed theories of the Methodic Sect, according to Themison of Laodicea, or the School of the Empirics. The debate was originated by radical changes which were introduced in medicine at the end of the 2nd century B.C. by Asclepiades of Prusa, a city of Bithynia, well versed in humanities and the art of rhetoric. He came to Rome in order to accumulate more fortune than in his country and his eloquence, combined with the art of medicine, enabled him to impose himself upon the Roman public, Pliny says. He opposed the practice of Archagathus, characterized by aggressive methods of treatment, making a radical change. His own therapeutic practice was famous for its emphasis on a mild treatment, i.e. non-violent exercise, regulated use of food and wine, bathing and body-massage, walking and rocking, to achieve a balance in the body of atoms. Opposed to Hippocratic humoralism, he believes that diseases are due to a disturbance of the passage of atoms through the pores, and *status strictus-status laxus* are the two conditions that should be balanced for health.

Where did this bizarre theory of Asclepiades come from?, asks J.T. Vallance. And why did the theory vanish, apparently without trace, followed by none of the eminent physicians coming from Asia Minor to Rome in the next two centuries?

He crushed the ancient system of medicine, with a theory which was a derivation from philosophical thought more than

from observation. It may be conceivable that Asclepiades is fully part of the philosophical history of corpuscular theories of matter, which were developed in Greece by early atomists, i.e. Leucippus, Democritus and Epicurus, Empedocles and Anaxagoras, extended to living beings, as discussed by Aristotle (*De generatione et corruptione* 314 a1-314 b1). The ποροί theory may be seen as a reaction to Erasistratus, i.e. the multiple step pathway leading to an inflammatory process (congestion of veins, transference of blood from veins to arteries, interruption to the flow of pneuma through the heart, forcing of blood to the sides of the arteries).

Asclepiades led a tendency to characterize diseases as uniform, reducible to one type of explanation which is typical of Greek medicine (i.e. imbalance of humors for Hippocrates). Thus, when Galen makes a bridge between Hippocrates' humoralism and the widely embracing medicine that he elaborates, the theories of Asclepiades disappear.

The "lost theory" of Asclepiades offers the theoretical basis for the Methodic Sect and the book treats the movements of atoms (οὔκοι) in various aspects, e.g. respiration, movement in the body, urinary secretion, heart disease. It is a fascinating and interesting journey: the comparison between Erasistratus and Asclepiades (regarding physiology, pathology) shows that for Erasistratus veins and arteries (i.e. movement of blood) are the background of diseases, whereas for Asclepiades it is pores (i.e. movement of corpuscles). A comparison is made also between the thought of Asclepiades and the classical Methodics (regarding phrenitis, pleuritis, pneumonia, cardiac passio, synanche, tetanus), thus indicating that Asclepiades adopted uniform type of explanation for all affections in the body. And this uniform hypothesis could explain its own failure, J.T. Vallance observes. Finally, the book underlines "the importance of studying medical philosophers in their own intellectual surroundings", so that "a closer study of the interactions between Stoics and Epicureans is also needed" (e.g. Hero of Alexandria may be regarded as a follower of Asclepiades).

The book will be read with great interest, the analysis of the thought of Asclepiades is well developed and comparisons with either Erasistratus or the Methodic Sect are convincing. Only the final suggestion must be viewed with caution.

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