

BOOK REVIEW ΒΙΒΛΙΟΠΑΡΟΥΣΙΑΣΗ

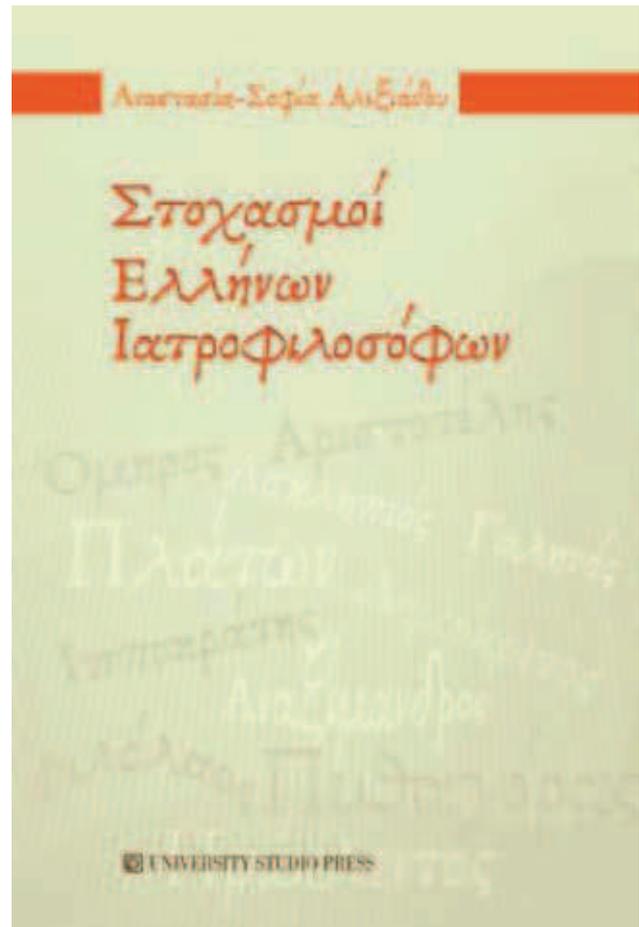
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Thoughts on Greek Physicians-Philosophers

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This is an interesting, significant contribution on the evolution of the history of medicine intertwined with philosophical thought and ethics. As the author points out, the field of Philosophy of Medicine deals with a philosophical approach to medicine, whereas Medical Philosophy defines the attitude of physicians to medicine and the great issues – the value of life, death, health, disease, and the relationship of man with other beings and the universe.

This book is an exciting chronicle of the birth, evolution and development of medicine, in parallel with the philosophical thought from the archaic period and Homer to the time of the establishment of Schools of Philosophy in ancient Greece, the period of Aesculapius, which was one of the peaks in ancient medicine. It was during this period that the symbols of medicine emerged, namely the sacred snake, the emblem of rejuvenation due to its skin change, and the staff of medicine. Aesculapius with his two sons Machaon and Podaleirios and five daughters, Iaso, Hygeia (Health), Panacea, Aceso and Egle, were worshipped as gods and goddesses, respectively, as the protectors of Hygeia (Health). During the period of Aesculapius, the Asclepieia were established, which were the first hospitals and medical schools, for patient care and the teaching of medicine. The first and most significant of these was the Asclepieion of ancient Epidaurus, in the Peloponnese, situated close to the famous ancient theater, but independent in its structure and functions. The Epidaurus Asclepieion was founded in the 4th century BC, located in an area rich in vegetation and natural beauty, which is an ideal environment for mental and physical rest, recuperation and philosophical thinking. It was a well organized establishment with sleeping facilities (enkoimesis) for in-patients, a guest house, a temple with



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an altar, a stadium and gymnasium for physical exercise and athletic games, baths, a sanctuary and the neighboring theater. In 1988, the Asclepieion of Epidaurus was included in the UNESCO list of World Cultural Heritage sites.

The chronicle of medicine and the philosophical thoughts of physician-philosophers continued with the eminent and renowned pre-Socratic philosophers, Parmenides, Pythagoras and Heraclitos and culminated in the Hippocratic era, which was the high point of ancient Greek and indeed the known world of early medicine. It was in the Hippocratic

era that the scientific basis of medicine was established, with the Hippocratic principle in the practice of medicine "Do no harm", which was passed on to the Roman age as "primum non nocere". This constitutes the supreme duty of physicians in the practice of medicine, coupled with the aphorism "It is better to prevent than to cure". Hippocratic medicine was based on scientific observation and interpretation of disease, separate from the religious concept of disease, as retribution of the gods for man's faults. The Hippocratic Collection includes the themes "On Physiology", "On Pathology", "On Anatomy", "On Therapeutics", "On Surgery", "On neurological diseases", "On Obstetrics and Gynecology", "On Venereal and Skin diseases". The theme on "Medical Ethics" includes the works "The Oath", "The Law", "On Proper Conduct", "On the Physician" and "The Orders". "The Oath" is the shortest work and it exemplifies the principles which should guide the physician in the practice of medicine, which are support for patient, ethical conduct and respect for the teachers of medicine, who are considered to be as important as parents. It is a monument to the supreme values of medicine and to this day, all young physicians who complete their medical studies take the Hippocratic Oath on graduation from Medical School.

This book on the history of medicine proceeds with the Alexandrian period which flourished in the era of the Ptolemei in Egypt after the death of Alexander the Great. Alexandria, a world metropolis during the height of Ptolemei dynasty, had evolved as a center for letters, arts, science and learning with the famous Bibliothecae of Alexandria, the Museum and Institutions.

Plato is also included in the line of physicians-philosophers, as he defends the mission and rights of physicians. Aristotle, the most eminent of scientist-philosophers who established natural sciences, introduced the principles of heredity, physiology, zoology, hygiene and psychology. In his works he was influenced by the Hippocratic theory, but although Aristotle contributed to medical knowledge, he did not practice medicine. After Aristotle, during the Roman age, the leading physician-philosopher was Galen (130–200 AD) from Pergamum, whose scientific work constitutes a landmark in the development of medicine.

The Roman period was followed by years of decline. During the period of Byzantium there was a resurgence

of medicine, with the foundation of hospitals for patient care, philanthropy and charity, in accordance with Christian values. The best known hospital was the "Vassileiada Hospital" founded by Saint Vassilios in Kaisareia of Cappadocia, in present day Turkey. The health system was organized by the Justinian Code, with specialists and "tour doctors", who provided care to poor people visiting their homes, because of their inability to visit the hospital. Public health was also a priority, dealing with epidemics, such as cholera, plague, smallpox and typhoid fever, and sanitation of the water system and sewerage for disinfection and control of public places.

In more recent times, the Greek physician-scholar Adamantios Korais, who studied medicine in France, identified the causes of disease and emphasized the importance of a relationship of trust between patient and physician. This principal is particularly pertinent today in view of the dominant role of medical technology and the need to return to the holistic approach.

The last section of the book refers to the important topic of medical responsibility, the legal and ethical aspects of the practice of medicine. The main interest and the originality of the book lie in its approach of interrelating the historical evolution of medicine with the corresponding philosophical thought of each era. This is the power of the book, and its value, and what distinguishes it from the monographs on history of medicine and represents a major contribution on the part of the author, who is a graduate of the School of Philosophy of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

Her writing is lucid and comprehensive with a smooth flow of narration and clear concepts. As a book of philosophical content, this book is a pleasure to read and its style is elegant. It is addressed to a wide spectrum of readers-students of medicine, as a companion to the course "History of Medicine", physicians and those interested in the interrelationship of medicine and philosophy and the humanistic approach in medicine, in line with the Plato's aphorism in "Menexenos" "...all science when separated from justice and virtue is cunning and not wisdom...".

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